



THE GYPSY CARAVAN

By Nick Roddick, Evening Standard 23.08.07

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Jasmine Dellal's high-octane documentary, *When the Road Bends*, is set to propel gypsy music into the mainstream musical consciousness. Five years in the making, it's a joyous celebration of an incredibly vibrant musical culture which surfaces in different forms but with similar traditions in different parts of the world.

The film, which follows a caravan of gypsy troupes on a concert tour and interweaves dazzling music footage with individual stories and circumstances, features Fanfare Ciocarlia, a band that brought down the tent at the Cambridge Folk Festival this summer, alongside fellow Romanians Taraf de Haïdouks; Rajasthan song-and-dance performers Maharaja; and the Antonio El Pipa Flamenco Company from Spain. Outpowering them all is the statuesque Macedonian singer Esma Redzepova, who has a voice that could halt traffic and is more popular in the Balkans than Shirley Bassey in Tiger Bay.

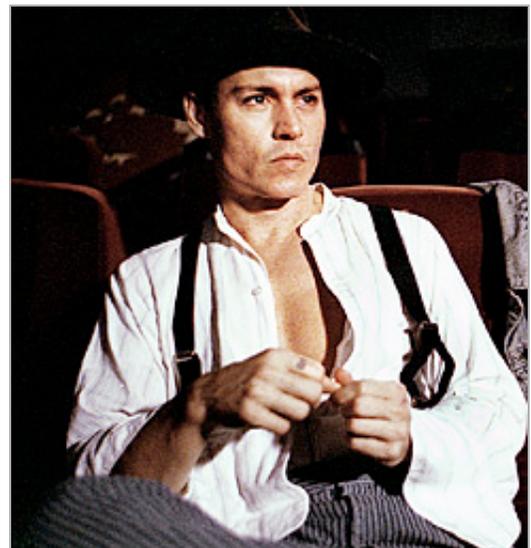
Adding a little rock 'n' roll, Johnny Depp also puts in an appearance, having got to know Taraf de Haïdouks while filming *The Man Who Cried* (Sally Potter's 2000 film about a refugee travelling from Russia to America who falls for a gypsy horseman). "Johnny is the one who basically puts into words the goal of the film," says Dellal, "which is to make people see that what you believed about gypsies your whole life is not true."

The Roma - the term "gypsy", once distinctly pejorative, has recently been re-embraced - started their migrations from India around a thousand years ago. They were one of the most victimised groups of the 20th century: a million or more died in the Holocaust, and persecution persists today in many parts of the world, notably the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Romania. And not just there, either: the demonised gypsy is the stuff of popular legend. Remember the clapping song that went "My mother said I never should/Play with the gypsies in the wood", with all kinds of dire consequences - like your hair never curling - if you did?

But, says Dellal, even the idea of a nomadic existence is part-myth. "The truth is that gypsies were forced to start



On the road: Gypsy band Fanfare Ciocarlia



Johnny Depp, "who puts words into the goal of the film"



moving in their origins; then there were laws against them settling in most places, so it was an identity imposed from the outside to say that gypsies are travellers. A large majority of gypsies today are sedentary and have been for at least a century."



Creator: Jasmine Dellal

Dellal, who turns 40 tomorrow, was introduced to contemporary Roma culture when she made a documentary for US public television called *American Gypsy* about a family living in Spokane, near Seattle, and began to realise the degree of official suspicion and hostility. "It turns out that there are handouts passed around different police departments to label typical 'gypsy crimes'," she says. "They have lists of typical gypsy names, ways to recognise and outfox gypsy criminals. They actually have these things published and circulated."

The sister of film director Gaby (*One Fine Day*) and daughter of colourful property tycoon "Black Jack" Dellal, Jasmine, who studied journalism at Berkeley after Oxford, still has an impeccably English accent despite 11 years in the US, but found a reluctance there to believe that there was such a thing as Roma culture. "Most Americans don't have any idea what the word 'gypsy' means," she says. "When I told people I was making a film about gypsies, they'd say: 'Oh, my college roommate is a gypsy: he used to follow the Grateful Dead.'"

To make *When the Road Bends*, the director did a fair bit of following herself: the film records a gruelling, 16-city tour of North America in 2001, followed by two years of catching up with the bands on their home turf, shooting in places far from the comfort of hotels and catering trucks. "Being in the middle of the desert in Rajasthan is very beautiful and peaceful," says Dellal, who spent summers in India as a child with her Indian grandmother, "but it's not very good for charging batteries. I had to get over to the wine merchant's house and beg them to let me plug in. And it was an hour-and-a-half 's bus ride to the nearest place with a telephone. But it was never any difficulty living with the families: they couldn't have been more welcoming."

Dellal does admit, however, that the initial days on the tour bus with the predominantly male band members were not without problems. "The first phrase I learned in Romany was 'Don't be an octopus!' But once that was made clear - and it didn't take more than a couple of days - it was absolutely fine: I became a sister." The Indians were useful, too. "Whenever any arguments were brewing, you'd suddenly find an Indian plonked in the middle doing something so funny that everybody had to laugh!"

Dellal had never made a music documentary before, and couldn't answer when a friend asked her what her favourite concert films were. "I realised that I hadn't actually seen many that I liked, so I went and watched another 20 or 30 and realised that I still hadn't seen many I liked. They tended to assume the music is great and you're a fan, so put it all on the big screen and you'll love it. I really didn't want to do that."

It was probably a wise decision: although their albums sell in impressive numbers, the bands featured in the film are best heard live. Indeed, *Fanfare Ciocarlia* has to be one of the best live bands in the world, judging by their performance this summer in the gorgeous Romanian town of Sibiu.

Later, after a screening of the film in Cluj, the capital of Transylvania, which has a large and sometimes persecuted Roma population, a woman stood up and began to talk hesitantly about her Roma heritage in a way that made it clear this was the first time she had talked about these things in public. Screenings are now being arranged for a number of groups - including a Roma woman's group - in Romania.

Dellal decided early on that, if she was going to capture what was important about gypsy music, she couldn't just record concerts. "I told everybody I wanted close-up shots of faces when we were doing the concert footage because it was about people," she says. "I wanted this film very much to allow the music to play out and not put MTV images all over it or cut it up into tiny pieces. But, at the same time, I felt that the film had to give a lot more, which is why I felt it was really important to get to know the people and go to the different countries so that, by the end, even if you didn't want to learn anything, you'd learned something you never expected to."

She was helped enormously in all of this by having one of the great documentary-makers, Albert Maysles (Gimme Shelter, Grey Gardens), then 75, as her main cameraman. She'd met him some five years ago at a film festival and told him about her plans. "And he said, 'I'm shooting it for you!'. I said, 'Al, that's great, but I'm guessing that my budget will be nowhere near your rate.' And he said, 'That's got nothing to do with anything, I definitely want to do this film.' And he meant it. He's so full of beans, it's ridiculous. We were going on this test shoot to Europe and I said, 'Do I have to buy you a business-class ticket?' And he said, 'Don't be ridiculous, get the cheapest ticket you can find on the internet: this is an independent documentary.'"

It was, however, the other cameraman, Alain de Halleux, who shot the film's most moving scene: the funeral of Taraf 's 78-year-old violin genius, Nicolae Neacsu, who died just after the tour in 2002. It's an emotional affair, with musicians playing outside the house where Neacsu is lying, and Roma families calling in droves to pay respects. In the final shots, the dawn is coming up and I tell Dellal I am impressed by the fact that the musicians seem to have played all night. "Actually," she says, "they played for three nights."

- **When the Road Bends opens on 28 September.**

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