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Posted on Fri, Aug. 3, 2007

### Variety is the spice of song in 'Gypsy Caravan'

By TY BURR  
The Boston Globe

"Gypsy Caravan" has already been thumbed as "the 'Buena Vista Social Club' of gypsy music," and that serves as a useful enough description for world beat fans and ethno-cinema junkies. That shorthand misses the sprawling, aching heart of Jasmine Dellal's documentary, which puts Romany musicians from five groups and four countries on a bus rumbling across America, letting them melt their differences in a shared legacy of pain and joy. It's a reunion of a family separated by 10 centuries of diaspora.

Dellal plays a little fast and loose with chronology, but her film (shot in part by the legendary documentary filmmaker Albert Maysles) essentially records the 2001 "Gypsy Caravan" U.S. tour while intercutting scenes of the musicians in their home countries. From Macedonia comes the redoubtable Esma Redzepova, "Queen of the Gypsies," Nobel Peace Prize-nominated humanitarian, and possessor of a voice that can move mountains. From Rajasthan in northwest India come Maharaja, a multi-piece consortium of musicians, dancers, poets, and singers that plays ragas spiced with the cross-dressing traditional dances of the group's breakout star, Sayari Sapera. (He whirls, Sufi-style, in dazzling costumes.)

From Andalusia, Spain, comes a gypsy flamenco ensemble led by dancer Antonio El Pipa and anchored by his aunt, Juana la del Pipa, whose face is out of a Pedro Almodóvar movie and whose voice is from the center of the earth. Two groups are on board from Romania: the lively klezmer-ish brass band Fanfare Ciocarlia and Taraf de Haidouks, a motley crew of traditional folk musicians led (sort of) by the aged, impish fiddle player Nicolai Neauescu.

Taraf de Haidouks appeared in Sally Potter's 2000 film "The Man Who Cried," and that movie's star, Johnny Depp, is interviewed in an attempt to convince us how important this music is as an expression of a much-abused people's soul. Fine, but we're convinced already. The various sounds here stream together in a rolling river of Indo-European blues, and the differences between the groups are quickly overshadowed by the similarities.

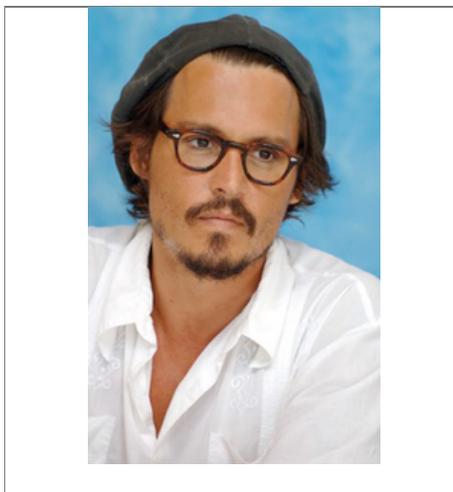
At the beginning of the tour, the notion that the musicians of Maharaja could back the flamenco dancers, or that the Macedonian ensemble could play with the Romanians seems far-fetched. By the end, they're all jamming happily, and Redzepova and Juana la del Pipa have formed a multilingual friendship that takes up half the tour bus in spirit and physical bulk.

The film's most affecting sequences are those filmed in the musicians' villages, where these most exotic of artists live humbly (although Neauescu holds out hopes of getting "a pool as big as Johnny Depp's").

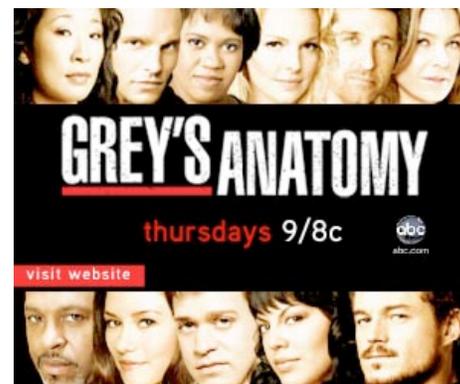
"Gypsy Caravan" makes the distinction between music as it's played on the concert stage and music as it's lived, and the latter represents a bittersweet adaptation to wherever the Romany find themselves as well as a direct line back to a long-gone homeland.

"Gypsy Caravan" could have used some judicious trimming, but you forgive Dellal her excesses as she forgives her artists theirs. This is music to gorge on, raw ethnic survival in the form of sound. "I never assimilated for anyone," maintains Redzepova, and how can you doubt her when history speaks every time she opens her mouth to sing? \*

Produced and directed by Jasmine Dellal, distributed by Docurama.



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