

Louis Project: The Unrepentant Marxist

May 3, 2007

Gypsy Caravan

Filed under: [Roma](#), [music](#) — louisproject @ 6:12 pm

Scheduled for theatrical release in June (NYC, the 15th; Los Angeles the 29th), “Gypsy Caravan: When the Road Bends” is a film that is very much in the mold of “Buena Vista Social Club” and just as likeable. It also evokes the 1993 “Latcho Drom” (“safe journey”), another great film about Roma music.



It documents a six-week tour in 2001 by some of the greatest Roma musicians in the world, who are seen performing, socializing with each other in hotels and on the bus, and participating in village life back home. It is directed by Jasmine Dellal, who directed “American Gypsy: a Stranger in Everybody’s Land” for PBS in 2001, and filmed by Albert Maysles, the legendary director of “Gimme Shelter,” a record of a

Rolling Stones tour, and other works.

The tour was organized by the World Music Institute (WMI), a New York-based nonprofit whose concerts I have reviewed in the past and who I have contributed money to. Given New York’s relentless drive toward high-rise yuppie hell, the WMI is one of the remaining cultural artifacts that make life livable here. Furthermore, the culture of the Roma people is about as at odds with the profit-driven world of real estate and banking as can be imagined. Besides their cultural legacy of some of the world’s greatest music, these unfairly maligned peoples can teach us about how to live better lives. Macedonian Esma Rezepova, one of the tour’s starring performers, put it this way: “The Roma have never made war or invaded another country.”



Esma

I was fortunate enough to attend the Gypsy Caravan concert in New York back in 2001 and was simply bowled over by Esma, who I would regard as one of the great female popular singers of the 20th century along with Oum Kulthoum. Although I own her CD’s, nothing can compare to seeing her in concert. The film, however, does bring you closer to that experience.

Her best known single “Čaje Šukarije” is the feature song on the 2006 Borat movie soundtrack, which she claims was used without her permission. You can listen to it [here](#). Along with fellow Roma musicians Naat Veliov and Kočani Orkestar, whose music was also used without permission, she is planning an 800,000 euro (\$1,000,000) lawsuit against the producers of the film.

This leads me to the question of Roma village life, which is really at the heart of this wonderful film. As you probably know, Sasha Baron Cohen filmed a Romanian gypsy village, supposedly Borat’s hometown, in order to establish his backwardness, as well as the backwardness of the villagers. Since he is not identified as a Roma, but as a citizen of Kazakhstan, one might wonder how much damage was done to their reputation. It is difficult to say.

But if Sasha Baron Cohen could find some time in his busy career to look at the deeper reality of Roma life, he would be well-advised to see “Gypsy Caravan” for an object lesson in how life should be lived.

The film takes us to the village of the members of Taraf De Haidouks (“band of brigands”), who are led by patriarch Nicolae Neascu and who died during the tour. His funeral is part of the film and is truly heart-rending. Although his recordings and tour made Neascu a wealthy man, he chose to live modestly and gave most of his money to the villagers. During an interview, Neascu relates a Roma story about the fates asking whether one prefers a good life during youth and a hard life in old age, or vice versa. He chose the latter. All in all, with his affable senior citizen charm, Nicolae Neascu comes across as second cousin to the musicians in “Buena Vista Social Club.”



Taraf De Haidouks, the late Nicolae Neascu to the left

“Gypsy Caravan” also features Maharaja, Indian Roma musicians, who blend Arabic, Sufi trance and other styles with the music of their native Rajasthan. The other featured groups are Fanfare Ciocarlia, an 11 man brass band from the Romanian-Moldavian border, and the Antonio Pipa Flamenco Ensemble.

The film is dedicated to [Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015](#), an initiative of 8 governments, the UN, George Soros and the World Bank which is intended to fight poverty and discrimination, as well as improve education, employment, health and housing.

As it turns out, I saw and [reviewed](#) Jasmine Dellal’s 2001 PBS documentary “American Gypsy”. It is worth repeating my opening paragraphs:

Last night PBS Frontline aired “American Gypsy”, a documentary that made a brief appearance in NYC theaters last year. It features Jimmy Marks, a Spokane based used car dealer, who was the first Rom in the United States ever to challenge the racism of the dominant society, in his specific case an illegal cop raid on his home.

As PBS tends to repeat shows, my advice is to look for it. This film is a fascinating introduction into a world that tries to exist outside of the world of the “gadjo” or non-Roma. They fear that assimilation will destroy the unique Roma culture. These sorts of fears would remind us of another “unassimilated” group, the Orthodox Jew, who tries to co-exist as economic actors

in gentile society, while preserving their own customs and beliefs inside their community.

Although I doubt if such a history has ever been written, a Marxist account of the Roma people would account for them in terms of what Abram Leon called the “people-class” in “The Jewish Question.” The Jews, according to Leon, “constitute historically a social group with a specific economic function. They are a class, or more precisely a people-class.” That economic function is tradesman. The Jew, from the days of the Babylonian exile, have functioned as tradesmen. Their location in the Mid-East facilitated commercial exchanges between Europe and Asia. As long as the Jew served in this economic capacity, the religious and national identity served to support his economic function.

As a people-class Jews are able to maintain their ethnic identity no matter what country they live in. The same thing is true of the Roma who emigrated westward from India about a thousand years ago. Unlike the Jews, their economic function was not related to trade but to handicrafts which could be picked up and moved at the drop of a hat. This included horse trading and repairing pots and pans. In modern times these crafts have evolved into auto dealing, Jimmy Marks’s profession, and auto body repair. Also, Romas are some of the world’s greatest musicians who have made their mark on flamenco, jazz and Eastern European folk music. (For a great introduction to Roma music, I recommend the documentary “Latcho Drom” and the feature “Gadjo Dilo”, both by Roma director Tony Gatlif.)

According to Roma scholar Ian Hancock, who is at the University of Texas and of Roma origin himself, the Romany term gadjo, or outsider, is related to the Sanskrit “gajjha,” which means civilian. In the documentary Jimmy Marks is shown playing with his grand-daughter. As he counts off from one to ten, the narrator and director Jasmine Dellal (a British Jew) notes that the words for the numbers are the same as they are in Sanskrit.

The Marks clan are part of the Romanian Gypsies, or Vlax, who migrated in large numbers to the United States around the turn of the century and for the same reason that Jews and other groups did: to flee oppression. The Vlax had been enslaved in Romania for nearly 500 years. This fact more than any other explains the suspiciousness with which they regard the outside world. When I was growing up in the Catskill Mountains in the 1950s, my parents would often remark without much prompting, “You can’t trust the goyim.” Roma, who despite being murdered in equal numbers by the Nazis, have never been given the kind of moral or financial reparations given to the Jews. They are still despised and persecuted.

[“Gypsy Caravan” website](#)

[Esma website](#)

[A video of Taraf De Haidouks in performance](#)

[A video of Fanfare Ciocarlia](#)

[Antonio Pipa Website](#)

3 Comments [»](#)

1. I was very interested in the excerpt you posted about Iran on the Brink, thanks. Wondering if you’ve seen this:

<http://www.marxist.com/iran-hard-disk-socialism150605-2.htm>

Comment by Poulod — May 3, 2007 @ [11:40 pm](#)

2. Slight correction: the village in Borat was Romanian, but not gypsy, although there some gypsies in it. (Source: my Romanian-Serbian girlfriend.)

Also, the “translations” in Borat of what villagers were saying was inaccurate. Borat’s “wife” and others were saying things a lot worse than what was shown at the bottom of the screen!

Comment by [Binh](#) — May 10, 2007 @ [4:17 pm](#)

3. “The Marks clan are part of the Romanian Gypsies, or Vlax, who migrated in large numbers to the United States around

the turn of the century and for the same reason that Jews and other groups did: to flee oppression. The Vlax had been enslaved in Romania for nearly 500 years.”

Well, it may be interesting another point of view, from a Romanian this time (not Gypsy): <http://right-behind.blogspot.com/2007/07/romanians-and-gypsies-two-worlds-apart.html>

“Roma, who despite being murdered in equal numbers by the Nazis, have never been given the kind of moral or financial reparations given to the Jews. They are still despised and persecuted.”

At least they made a lot of money in “Borat” ;). It looks like Western Europeans are veeery generous: I read here - http://legalsoapbox.freeadvice.com/n37190_Romanian_Gypsy_Village_Outraged_By_Borat_Threatens_To_File_Suit.htm - that they’ve been paid \$3 to \$5 to perform in the film. Lots of money! ;)))

Christian

Comment by [Christian](#) — July 9, 2007 @ 9:00 pm

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