

movies



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Film Review : Gypsy Caravan

Jasmine Dellal's magnificent music film, **Gypsy Caravan**, hits the rare daily double of being supremely entertaining AND socially conscious. A record of a six-week tour of five geographically and musically disparate bands -- whose common link is that they all trace their lineage in some way to the Romani, or Gypsy people -- the movie is an endlessly surprising portrait of a culture that I (and maybe you, too) had assumed was defined by and limited to Eastern Europe. Before we forge further into ethnic, ethnographic and sociological territory, though, I want to make plain that **Gypsy Caravan** is, first and foremost, a superb concert flick.

The primary measure of a great concert film, I submit, is that it gets you moving in your seat. You might say that's setting the bar too low. Alright, then how come there are so few filmed performances where the artists break through the screen, and the music touches your cerebral cortex (especially without the boost of the live show's decibel count)? My list includes Jonathan Demme's **Stop Making Sense** and Jim Jarmusch's **Year of the Horse** (starring Neil Young and Crazy Horse). Throw in parts of **Woodstock** and Martin Scorsese's Band epic, **The Last Waltz**. **Don't Look Back** is a great documentary, but that's due more to Dylan's offstage persona than his onstage performance (which isn't exactly a toe-tapper, in any event). OK, what else? Exactly.

Gypsy Caravan benefits from an uncommon variety of musical styles, from the Romanian violin ensemble Taraf de Haidouks (which, to my ears, is the archetypal Gypsy sound) to the mesmerizing Indian folk group Maharaja. The stark and haunting dramatics of the Antonio El Pipa Flamenco Ensemble from Andalucia are a continent away from the blistering Romanian horn attack of Fanfare Ciocarlia. And in a league of her own is the great Macedonian diva Esmá Redžepova, whose talent, fame, ego and personality just barely fit on the bus.

Most of the tunes are about exile, separation and loss -- in other words, they're blues songs. So Dellal astutely goes and films the musicians in their dusty hamlets and ordinary apartments, immersed in their daily lives, far from the glittering concert halls and cosmopolitan autograph-seekers. We see their hardships and standard of living, and it's not what you associate with world-class artists. (The members of Fanfare

Ciocarla used the proceeds from their first album to have electricity installed in their village.) When Dellal brings us back to the tour bus or a performance, we have a fresh insight into what it's like for these performers to be treated as stars by adoring crowds (as well as to navigate the "comforts" of a Motel 6).

One purpose of these excursions is to spotlight the second-class citizenship that the Romani people endure all over the world. Dellal, who was born and educated in Britain, spent the '90s in the Bay Area, where she earned her master's degree from U. C. Berkeley under instructors such as the late Marlon Riggs and Jon Else. She met a Romani man who -- despite the closed and wary nature of Romani society -- became the subject of her fine debut documentary, **American Gypsy**. Dellal devoted the opening section of that film to a history of the Romani people, who (if my memory is accurate) actually originated in India.

As it happens, Dellal spent summers as a child with her grandparents in an Indian village. (She's also Jewish, so she has her own lineage of exile and blues songs.) It's not surprising, after all, that a troupe called Maharaja would be on a **Gypsy Caravan**, or even that a slender Englishwoman (now based in New York) would emerge as the second-leading chronicler of Roma culture, after Tony Gatlif (**Latcho Drom**).

Dellal's visits to the artists' homes also serve another, equally important function. She evokes the roots of the music and beautifully conveys the degree to which it permeates the performers' lives. We see how they're steeped in it from an early age, without outside influences. In other words, it's real soul music, as well as blues.

I imagine if you ask for Esmá Redžepova or Antonio El Pipa Flamenco Ensemble in a record store, you're directed to the world music section. But we come out of **Gypsy Caravan** with such a clear appreciation for the specificity of each artist's heritage, tradition and inspiration that to file them under "world music" seems condescending and a little ignorant. Similarly, it's a bit unfair to relegate **Gypsy Caravan** to the genre of concert films, since its ambitions extend so far beyond the stage. So let's leave it like this: Go for the music, stay for the humanity.

Gypsy Caravan is now playing at the Lumiere Theater in San Francisco and the Shattuck in Berkeley.

Posted by [Michael Fox](#) at 10:00AM

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