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"Gypsy Caravan": From Michigan to Rajasthan on a thousand-year road of joy and suffering

Music documentaries are harder to describe than other films, and harder to convince people to see. I think the best thing I can say on behalf of Jasmine Dellal's thoroughly wonderful "Gypsy Caravan" is that I was thrilled and transported by it. It's a two-hour movie, and I'm only sorry it isn't two or three times as long. Let me read your thoughts: You're not much interested in [Gypsy music](#), and the historical and cultural stuff might be pretty dry. That's what I thought too: Wrong and wrong.

What begins as a concert-tour doc about a varied group of Roma musicians (aka Gypsies, a term rejected by some Roma and embraced by others) as they travel the United States keeps getting broader, richer and deeper until it becomes a cinematic and musical experience that's absolute magic. "Gypsy Caravan" -- Dellal's full title, wisely abandoned for marketing purposes, is "When the Road Bends ... Tales of a Gypsy Caravan" -- veers from an illegal fishing trip in downtown Ann Arbor, Mich., to a backwoods village in eastern Romania to Rajasthan in northern India to the flamenco heartland of southern Spain.

Somehow all the disparate people, places and musical styles of this film -- the Roma are a worldwide diaspora, with numerous languages, religions and cultures -- come to seem coherent. You will learn a hell of a lot about Roma history from "Gypsy Caravan," but



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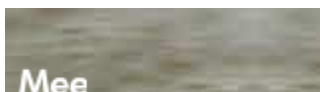
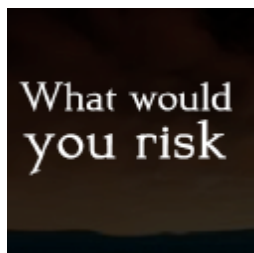
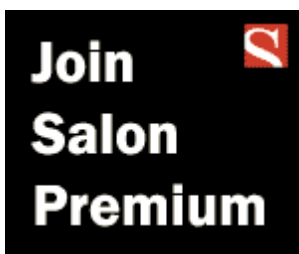
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believe me it never feels like education. You'll be too busy marveling at the "knees dance," as performed by an astonishing male dancer (in drag) along with the Indian combo Maharaja, or weeping and howling at the over-the-top theatrics of Esmá, a house-size Macedonian chanteuse who was a major star in the former Yugoslavia. (Her black-and-white music videos from late '60s Yugoslav TV are approximately the coolest things I've ever seen. Ever.)

Then there's Antonio el Pipa and his irascible aunt Juana, who led an electrifying flamenco ensemble from Jérez de la Frontera in Spain. And Taraf de Haïdouks, a manic string band from a tiny Romanian village (who have somehow become friendly with Johnny Depp). And Fanfare Ciocărlia, another Romanian group whose brass-band style borrows from the martial music of the Ottoman Empire. Dellal follows this random, cheerful, not-always-reliable assemblage around America and back to their home countries, illustrating the thousand-year Roma odyssey out of India and across Eurasia with nary a lecture or a chart.

As Juana says late in the film, the world owes a debt to the Gypsies, who have been persecuted for centuries (Hitler tried to exterminate them with just as much ardor as he did the Jews) without ever starting a war or even having a nation of their own. Instead of seeking retribution, the worldwide Roma caravan has enriched the musical tradition of almost every country. You can't really talk about the spirit or essence of this music without lapsing into cliché: Are these musicians tied together by something reckless, something fatalistic, a willingness to embrace laughter and tears in the same moment? Whatever it is, it's a gift to all of us, whether we deserve it or not.

"Gypsy Caravan" opens June 15 at the [Angelika Film Center](#) and Lincoln Plaza in New York; June 29 in Los Angeles and Washington; July 6 in Boston, Monterey, Calif., New Haven, Conn., San Francisco and Santa Cruz, Calif.; July 20 in Philadelphia, Rochester, N.Y., San Diego, Santa Fe, N.M., and Seattle; Aug. 3 in Ithaca, N.Y., and Santa Barbara, Calif.; Aug. 10 in Athens, Ga., Dallas, Houston and Austin, Texas; Aug. 15 in Portland, Maine; Aug. 24 in Chicago; and Aug. 31 in Detroit, with more cities to follow.

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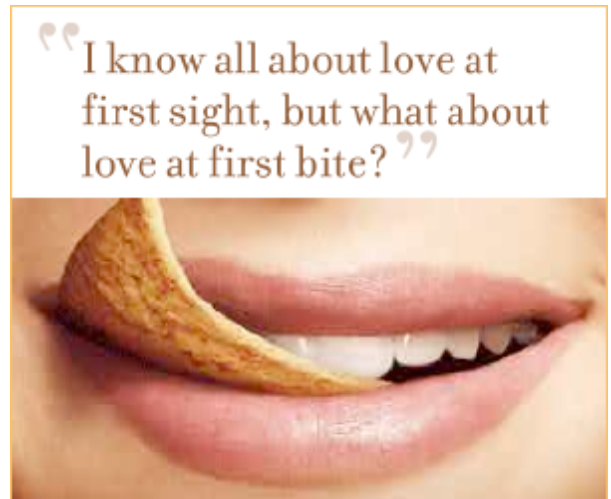
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