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Fanfare Ciocarlia

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[9 July 2007]

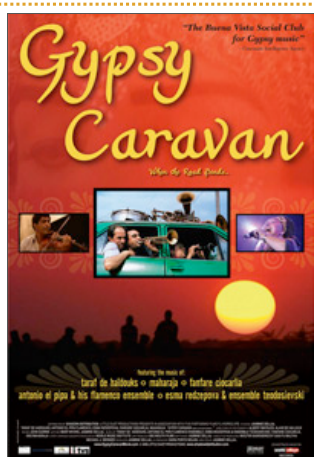
by Derek Beres

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The question of identity affects us in stark and profound—and very often, unconscious—ways. Individuals, and by extension the communities they are born within, generally use two means of defining “who” they are: geography and religion. It can be argued that the latter, like all later affiliations in life, is a conscious choice, although many religious groups believe themselves to have inherently been born as such. Geography is, then, the most reliable means of defining a culture.

The Rom, popularly known as Gypsies, has not fit this mold for some time, mostly due to the fact that no one can prove where its origins lay. (The same can be said for humanity in general.) While linguistic parallels trace the Romani dialect to India, some feel that these people originally arrived from East Africa. The Sidis of Gujarat, the “Black Sufi” community in India, is one example of how ethnographic cultures form over time. Claiming India as the motherland of Gypsy culture doesn’t always pan out: some feel that they are the descendants of the *kshatriya*, the warrior caste, while others claim they were lower, given the fact that wherever they traveled that is the role they assume.

Gypsy Caravan, a new documentary about a six-week tour featuring some of modernity's top Gypsy musicians, is an exceptional peek at life on the road, entwined with the history, and current state, of Gypsy culture.



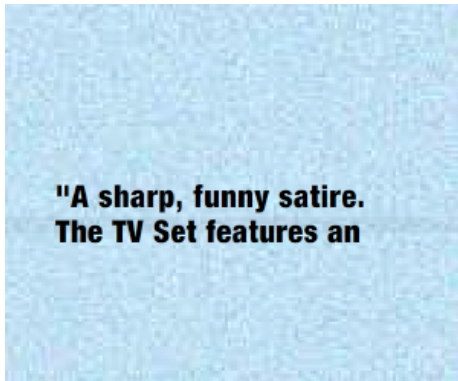
When the Road Bends: Tales of

And traveled the Rom did, to Persia in the ninth century, and soon after up the Balkan trail into Eastern Europe. Today Gypsy culture is global; the term comes from economic and social standing as much as ancestry, as well speaking the Romani language. Why, exactly, the seemingly random journeying of a lower-class population should even deserve attention seems confusing, until we recognize one simple fact, regarding the influence of their travels: they are the very soul of each culture they touch.

While today we view Gypsies in an exotic manner, as mysterious and prophetic ball-gazing women and beaten hat-wearing men involved in professions of trade and thievery, the reality is more a matter of media. Being

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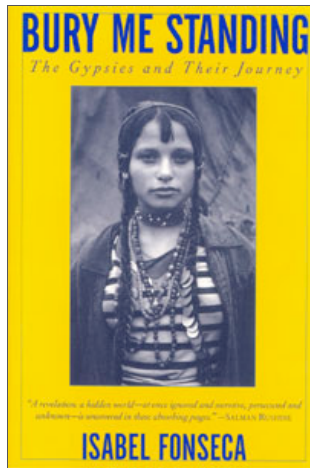
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a Gypsy Caravan
(DOCURAMA)**Isabel Fonseca**
Bury Me Standing: The Gypsies and Their Journey

(VINTAGE; US: 29 OCT 1996)

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Ensemble—are not yet household names in America, the tour exposed many to their incredibly rich, textured, and extremely diverse sounds. Just as this tour defined Gypsy music in America, the recent documentary made from this gathering, *Gypsy Caravan*, is certain to become a landmark film in international culture.

The film's subtitle comes from a Romani proverb ("You cannot walk straight when the road bends") and was shot by a team including legendary documentary filmmaker Albert Maysles. Director Jasmine Dellal has created an exceptional peek at life on the road, entwined with the history, and current state, of Gypsy culture. There is so much vibrancy to each character, and so much depth to their relationships, that every bend this film takes proves riveting.

First, the music. The live performances are the foundation of the film, by which the underlying themes are told. Footage and sound quality are amazing, and most of the songs are captured on the accompanying soundtrack (released on World Village). Seeing these seemingly disparate outfits perform besides—and sometimes with—each other visually and aurally weaves them together. The connection between a harmonium- and *dholak*-led group of Rajasthan desert dwellers and the fire of two large Eastern European ensembles—one brass-based, the other by accordion, clarinet and *cimbalom*—is internally felt, and experienced. You can hear it in the exaggerated, soulful wails of their voices, and in the vibrant expressions they assume in performance.



Taraf de Haidouks

What proves most interesting is watching these kings and queens on

financially dependent on their own communities and not the population at large, their plight is rarely broadcast. When it is, that media is usually biased. Over one million Gypsies were killed by Hitler's madness; without big-budget films and continual media figures taking up their plight, this remains an overlooked chapter in world history.

Yet, as Isabel Fonseca writes in *Bury Me Standing: The Gypsies and Their Journey*, "There is something useful about ambiguous origins, after all: you can be whoever you want to be." While this statement itself is ambiguous, Rom culture certainly has taken advantage, helping creating the folk musics of India, Spain, and the Balkans over the past ten or 11 centuries. In celebration of this cross-continental journey, World Music Institute sponsored a six-week tour featuring some of modernity's top Gypsy musicians in 2001 entitled *Gypsy Caravan*, which became a huge success.

So while the five bands on this tour—Romania's Taraf de Haidouks and Fanfare Ciocarlia, Macedonia's Esma Redzepova, Rajasthan's Maharaja, and Andalusia's Antonio el Pipa Flamenco

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stage, at one moment performing a confident, regal music, and returning with them home. This is where the film's great strength lies. It does not stop by merely taking snapshots on the bus and in hotels, and of course, on stage. Each band is followed to their villages, and they wax realistic on what their lives mean, what this music means. There is an intimate scene with the charismatic violinist and vocalist of Taraf, Nicholae Neascu, where he explains how the money he earns supports more than a simple nuclear family—as well as his admitting that he was happy to have found fame later in life, when most of his mistakes have already been made.

And of course the course of Juana al del Pipa's life, where drugs destroyed her family and her faith in God brought them back. Watching her wail in the rehearsal studio, as Antonio is instructing dancers, is one of those truly special scenes that can only be captured in one take, at one time. The time then becomes timeless. The same goes for the desert homes of Maharaja, and the economic hardships they face while forging a career in music. The scene where one of the singers mimics a flamenco dance, to everyone's laughter, is another special moment.

The storyline is well known: tragedy and struggle to create something beautiful and eternal—music. This is what strings together these multicultural Gypsies, in the same fashion that it ties us all together. *Gypsy Caravan* is a compellingly human story, gorgeously shot and magnificently edited. It tells the story this geography-deprived culture has wanted to tell for some time. It is not that the Rom are without homes; in fact, they have created some of the tightest and most loving familial communities known—something that America, a country where emotions are expressed by what you own and can materially provide, should take note of. These people provide each other with love, endless amounts of it, and inject that furious passion straight into their music. As one of the members of Fanfare mentions, Gypsy culture is something *you just feel*. In this case, as in many, the feeling far outweighs the words.

 [Gypsy Caravan](#) Official site

When the Road Bends: Tales of a Gypsy Caravan trailer



Derek Beres is the author of *Global Beat Fusion: The History of the Future of Music*, a book discussing the new world mythology being created by global electronica. His photojournalism has appeared in dozens of magazines, focused on the international music scene. As part of GlobeSonic Sound System he has traveled the planet DJing with the top names in world music. He is also a Vinyasa yoga instructor at Equinox Fitness in Manhattan. Currently he is preparing two books for publication in early 2007, *Tangled Web: The Best Music Tour You Never Heard Of*, about his month-long journey with the Musica Fresca tour, and *A Staircase of Words*, a book of essays alongside writer Dax-Devlon Ross.

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