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San Francisco Chronicle

Romany documentary unveils rich mix of eclectic music

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Gypsy Caravan: Musical documentary. Directed by Jasmine Dellal. In Romany, Spanish, Romanian, Macedonian, Hindi and Marwari with English subtitles, and in English. (Not rated. 110 minutes. At Bay Area theaters. To see complete movie listings and show times, and to buy tickets for select theaters, go to sfgate.com/movies.)

"Gypsy Caravan" attempts to do for Gypsy musical traditions what "The Buena Vista Social Club" did for the Cuban sound -- increase public awareness and maybe boost CD sales. The new documentary isn't as immediately accessible as its 1999 predecessor, because it deals with a number of diverse groups who have only their Romany heritage in common, and it isn't as skillfully woven together.

But "Caravan" still sounds great and if nothing else should help diminish the stereotype, blasted by the film's subjects, of Gypsies as little more than pickpockets whom travelers need to be wary of.

Director Jasmine Dellal follows five bands from around the world on a U.S. concert tour. Although they hardly travel first class, you'd like to be on the bus when they start dancing and telling stories.

Their music is all over the place -- an eclectic mix of flamenco, jazz, raga, folk, klezmer and even a robust brass band. Each in its own way is tuneful and soulful, and movie audiences are likely to wish they could stand up and sway along.

One of the cameramen is Albert Maysles, who with his late brother David shot indelible concert footage of the Beatles and Rolling Stones. He makes you feel as if you're front and center at performances, bringing his camera in close to capture the joy of musical expression followed by broader shots of appreciative fans.

Macedonian singer Eσμα Redzepova, the so-called queen of the Gypsies, is a standout, a belter who has been compared to Big Mama Thornton. Ethel Merman also comes to mind.

The Romanian group Taraf de Haïdouks, 12 multifaceted musicians who switch from classical to pop in the blink of an eye, are showstoppers. In a brief appearance, Johnny Depp, who got to know them when they wrote the score for his film "The Man Who Cried,"



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calls them the "fastest violin players I've ever seen."

Dellal (a protege of the late award-winning Bay Area filmmaker Marlon Riggs) intersperses concert scenes with interviews with the performers in their hometowns. These vary greatly in terms of interest.

Redzepova is fascinating, showing off the music school she and her husband started when they found out they couldn't have children. Instead they brought youngsters from all around and taught them to play instruments.

But other performers are stuck on a single note. They talk about how music is very important because it brings money. One says his goal is to buy a swimming pool like Depp's. In a sense, their honesty is commendable. But it's also antithetical to a belief we perhaps naively hold onto that artists create because they have to.

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