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Opinion

Column - 'Gypsy Caravan' gives insight into culture

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"You cannot walk straight when the road bends."

It's a Romani proverb and it's the basis of the documentary film, "Gypsy Caravan."

The film is currently showing in art house theaters across the country, but when it comes out on DVD, you should see it.

"Gypsy Caravan" celebrates the music of top international Gypsy performers, interweaving tales of their home life with the story that unfolds on the road.

The performers are from India, Macedonia, Romania and Spain, but have one common thread - they are all Romani.

The Roma are one of the most oppressed people in the history of the world. They have faced discrimination, yet the music celebrates life and is full of hope.

Among the performers are Esma Redzepova of Macedonia, who is known as Queen of the Gypsies. Her voice is full of power, but also sadness.

When she recounts the story of her father, who was a victim of the Nazis, she says, "The whole world should see Roma as an example. They've never gone to war. They did not occupy any country. Did not harm anyone. But, instead, they get only evil."

Flamenco dancer Antonio El Pipa of Spain says, "What defines me most as an artist is being Gypsy. Flamenco came from the Gypsy people and Flamenco is very important in Spain. Maybe we really have something special to show the world."

The five bands from four countries give breath-taking performances throughout their 2001 concert tour of the United States and Europe.



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They play to packed auditoriums and receive accolades from audiences and critics.

Yet, when they are photographed in their homes, you get a real sense of the roots of the passion in their music.

The performers from Romania help their extended families and communities with money earned from the tour and CD sales.

One group brought electricity to their village.

One of the older performers, Nicolae Neacsu of Romania said, "I feed this whole family. I hope that God keeps me healthy ... The girl who plays the accordion - I pay for her studies in Bucharest. I pay the school, I pay money. I want her to study, to open her mind. That's why a man lives. To work and do something in life. Not for myself, I'm already old."

The performers tell their stories in a way that will captivate you.

Having this glimpse into their lives allows viewers to understand and celebrate the Romani culture.

But, it's the music that drives this film.

Early on in the six-week tour, the performers are not too sure about one another. Their musical styles are varied, as are their voices and their dance.

Yet, by the end of the tour, they are performing together, and celebrating their newly-formed family.

"Gypsy Caravan" is beautifully photographed and captures a moment in time when these Roma performers had an opportunity to share their culture and their talents with the world.

Hopefully, this film will open a door that allows a larger audience the chance to have that same, shared experience.

tammy leytham is editor of The Selma Times-Journal.

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