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VIFF '06 Interview – When The Road Bends director Jasmine Dellal

by **Jason Whyte**

"Gypsy musicians from all round the world met for the first time on a concert tour across North America. We were lucky enough to be there with cameras and Albert Maysles (Grey

When The Road Bends...groove at the VIFF (www.viff.org)

Gardens, Gimme Shelter). It's a road trip. It's a "best of" international Gypsy music. It is intimate tales of Romani families at home in Romania, Macedonia, Spain and India. Film audiences cry and laugh at a wedding, a funeral and playful antics to while away the hours of travel. Starstruck fans range from Johnny Depp to the crowds who sell out theatres and dance in their seats to the tunes of the breath-taking "Gypsy Caravan" shows." Jasmine Dellal, director of "When The Road Bends" which screens at the 25th Vancouver International Film Festival (Sep. 28 – Oct. 13).

Is this your first film in the VIFF? (Or the first film you have) Do you have any other festival experience? If you're a festival veteran, let us know your favourite and least-favourite parts of the festival experience.

This isn't my first film, but the first film that'll come to VIFF. My previous film went to lots of international festivals and I've been to a few festivals with this film too (it began with Tribeca, Karlovy Vary & Jerusalem). I just returned from Deauville Festival of American Film (in France) where the film was tremendously well received. After its first screening, I was walking

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down the town boardwalk and a middle-aged woman who saw me, put her fist in the air and said, "Vivent les Tziganes!"

That's my favourite thing about film festivals – seeing how a film can touch people, and then being able to make contacts with people who can become passionate about the same subjects as you. I've met so many people at festivals who I've ended up working with... It was at a festival in Taiwan that Albert Maysles insisted he should be the one to shoot my film, and at the same festival I met Alain de Halleux who was the other principal cameraman on this movie. At the Margaret Mead festival in NY, I first met George Eli, the Romani man who helped record sound for this movie, and whose film I am now executive producing.

Could you give me a little look into your background (your own personal biography, if you will), and what led you to the desire to want to make film?

In retrospect, I think perhaps my own heritage is part of the reason why I've spent a decade making films with Roma ("Gypsies"). From my accent, I sound like an English woman, which I am. But I'm also Polish, Jewish and Iraqi; I grew up in England and partly in India, and I've lived most of my adult life in the USA. So I belong to a lot of cultures, but I'm always on the edge of all of them. One Indian friend of mine describes me as a "mixed vegetable" curry.

So, perhaps this made it more appealing to spend so many years working with Roma and exploring their culture – after all, they are the ultimate world citizens. There are Romani citizens of almost every country on earth, and yet they are almost always on the edge, rarely fully belonging to the society where they live, even though they may have been there for hundreds of years. It's a curious insider: outsider power dilemma.

Growing up, you were no doubt asked the eternal question "When I grow up I want to be a ..." Finish this sentence, please!



forth?

I was lucky. There are three principal funders of this film: ITVS (which is an arm of US public television or CPB), Fortissimo Film Sales (a prestigious international sales agent), and A-Film (a European distributor for the Benelux countries). Obviously, all of these funders are entities that focus on releasing the film to audiences. In some ways, this may increase the pressure to deliver a product that fulfills their requirements, but in other ways it was a relief because (unlike with my first film) I already knew that someone would be interested in trying to show the film when it was finished. This allowed me to focus on making a film that I liked.

Luckily for me, all of these funders are people or organizations who believe that the film director has the last word in the shape of the finished movie. Unlike many people directing for network TV or some studios, I didn't have to make any big creative compromises in order to conform to their models of how the film should look in order to reach an audience.

I always knew that I wanted to make people laugh, and I wanted them to feel some of the joys and pains that I felt while living and working with the people in the film. It was also incredibly important to me that the subjects of the film would feel that they were truly represented. And I was lucky enough to work with an amazing musician and editor, Mary Myers, who went to great lengths to edit the music with integrity and respect so that the musicians would never object to our cuts.

In the end, I just thought about telling these stories as well as I possibly could and I hoped that the rest would take care of itself.

How did this project come to fruition? If you could, please provide me with a rundown, start to finish, from your involvement.

My prior film *American Gypsy* immersed me in these people and this culture in the USA. One day the *World Music Institute* spoke to me and said that they'd heard I knew something about Gypsies and about filming, and would I mind filming some of a concert that they'd organized with some Gypsy musicians. Initially I did it for laughs, but the people and music blew my mind.

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"Happy" ...even as a young kid, I couldn't see the point of anything beyond this (though I liked the fact that at one point, I think my 4-year-old sister had a crush on the window cleaner so she decided she wanted to be a window cleaner).

While you were making the movie, were you thinking about the future release of the film, be it film festivals, paying customers, critical response, and so

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A few months later I was at a film festival in Taiwan and I mentioned to Albert Maysles that I might make a film about a tour of Gypsy musicians if WMI organized more concerts. Maysles insisted that he should be the one to film it... needless to say, I was flattered, but wondered if I was in over my head.

The beginning of principal shooting was in late September 2001. Ouch! Everyone was scared about the big stuff in life, and about whether the concerts would be empty, or the artists wouldn't leave home, or wouldn't be let into North America; most of them have dark skin and many are muslim, not to mention being Gypsies. But the tour began fine, and I began filming — up until that point, everything had been funded by trusty Visa, Mastercard and Amex. Just 30 minutes before jumping on a 6-week concert tour bus to film, I received a letter from ITVS saying that I was into the next round for CPB funding selection. Yay! But where to write a grant? I did it on buses down the east coast, and then in a hotel room in Miami at night after concert shoots. Thank goodness the life of the tour made it onto the grant application, and a few months later ITVS became the film's first major funder.

At the end of December, I went to visit my mother who lives in South India, so I took a trip up to Rajasthan to visit the tour musicians who lived there. Again, it was hours before boarding the plane that I got confirmation of ITVS funding, so I quickly hired a skilled cameraman from Delhi, rather than filming myself. The trip was divine and we came home with stunning images.



Over the spring, I went to Spain, Romania and Macedonia to spend time with the other artists' families. Nothing ever went exactly as planned – cameras broke, a soundman failed to appear and we had to hire someone at 10pm in Bucharest, we arrived to film people who'd forgotten to tell us they were leaving town for 4 days, there were surprise demands for money, surprise weddings, a funeral... the usual for a documentary, I suppose. In the end, it went well and when I got back to the editing room I was overjoyed to see that so much of the footage was really beautiful.

The rest was just editing — translating 9 languages, sorting through footage and stories and editors and editing systems and budgets and funders and distributors and figuring out how to keep it simple. Five years later, here we all are, and I feel proud that audiences can meet the people that I met and see their music and get to truly enjoy it.

What was the biggest challenge in the production of the movie, be it principal photography or post-production?

Editing. We had about 200 hours of footage and lots of it is beautiful and interesting and unique. The narrative thread holding the movie together is a road trip and the growing friendships between the musicians. However, the most important narrative is the development of our feeling for Romani people and culture, as experienced from the inside – this isn't really "a story" so it depended on a delicate balance of music, road trip adventures and the soulful visits to the musicians' homes and families.

Please tell me about the technical side of the film; your relation to the film's cinematographer, what the film was shot on and why it was decided to be photographed this way.

The concert performance was shot on film (regular 16mm, on two of Al Maysles' cameras and a third that we rented). Kodak donated part of the stock. I was determined to shoot the actual performances on film for the intimacy and texture in the faces of the performers, and because it feels more slick and glamorous.



We used video for everything off-stage. Partly this is an aesthetic choice – video is more gritty than film, and life off-stage is more gritty than onstage. I think this is particularly relevant for Gypsies because most people only want to think about the happy singing, dancing Gypsy (who you see on stage) and it's more of a challenge to show the contrast between the glamour onstage and the grit offstage.

Our video was all PAL (because it looks so much better than NTSC). We shot DVcam on a PD150 which we bought specifically for this film. It was relatively cheap and it was the standard doc-filmmaker camera at the time.

I worked with two main cinematographers, and myself. On my first concert shoot with Albert Maysles, he and the fantastic Jon Else -- who shot a concert camera for us in Berkeley -- were asking me to direct them. I began, and then we laughed and I said something like, "you've been shooting beautiful concert footage for longer than I've been alive, so please tell me what YOU think will get us the best footage here!" Al was helpful and humble and a joy to work with, as always. He was always pleased and open to direction from me, but mostly it was extremely easy to just put him in the right situation, give him some context (when we were in a foreign country) and let him run with it.

The other main cinematographer was Alain de Halleux, who is a Belgian filmmaker. I think this was the first time that he'd shot a film that he wasn't also directing, so we had to adjust for that at the beginning, but then it was a very rewarding experience – he loves people and he loves beautiful light, so it was sometimes difficult to get him to turn the camera off in the context of warm families or great landscapes. He filmed some of the most stunning images in the movie.

Talk a bit about the festival experiences, if any, that you have had with this particular film. Have you had any interesting audience stories or questions that have arisen at screenings? (This can also apply to non-festival screenings as well, if you have had one.)

Well, one woman at Tribeca asked for Johnny Depp's phone number...

Mostly, I'm impressed at how many people are moved to laugh and truly cry in this film. At one recent festival, a couple came up to me afterwards, they had tears in their eyes and just said, "Thank you for teaching us to love them."

I also meet a lot of people at festivals who are Roman or work with Roma. It's impressive how more and more Roma are getting to see films about Roma and are beginning to make their own films about Rome. This is perhaps the most important thing about festival visits; I know there are lots of Gypsies in Canada, for example, so I hope that some of them will be able to come to the VIFF screenings.

My last film showed at New York's Margaret Mead festival, which did a phenomenal job on reaching out to Romani audiences in the area. A Romani man came up after the screening and asked me to make a film about his people. I ended up telling him to make it himself, with the promise that I would help all along the way. He said that he could never do it, but I'm pleased to say that he was wrong. The man in question is George Eli (who you see recording sound in my film *When The Road Bends*). Today he is 90% through making his own film about being Rom. It's a beautiful documentary – we arranged a screening of a rough cut and he got a well-deserved standing ovation. And I'm not sure it ever would have happened if he hadn't come along to a film festival screening and Q&A.

Who would you say your biggest inspirations are in the film world (directors, actors, cinematographers, etc)? Did you have any direct inspirations from filmmakers for this film in particular?

Specific to this film: before I began shooting, I watched a lot of concert films and I didn't love many of them. A couple of great exceptions were: Scorsese's *The Last Waltz*, Maysles' *Gimme Shelter*, and music films with story, like *Genghis Blues* by Roko & Adrian Belic. All of these



films treat the music very differently, but always with respect. It's a tricky balance for a film to have faith in its musical performances (rather than wallpapering over them or chopping them to pieces), but also to keep in mind that music on the screen will never be as inherently riveting as live music. So I think a film owes the audience something on screen that they can't get in a live show).

I referenced *The Last Waltz* a lot in shooting and editing, because of its apparent simplicity — when the music is playing, it's pure uninterrupted performance, and then there's normally a hard cut to interview/story which plays without music and carries you with anticipation towards the next piece of music.

How far do you think you would want to go in this industry? Do you see yourself directing larger stories for a larger budget under the studio system, or do you feel that you would like to continue down the independent film path?

I've always wanted to stick with documentaries rather than fiction, so no big studios for me. I'd love to keep doing what I do, with a few changes: steady budget, consistent editing partner, and an ever-growing world enthusiasm for seeing documentaries in cinemas, while accompanying that with powerful outreach efforts so that the films can have serious impact on the general public and their target audiences.

If you weren't in this profession, what other career do you think you would be interested in?

Musician. Unfortunately, I can't hold a note, but I have a long term plan: I'm going to play music and sing in my next life.



Please tell me some filmmakers or talent that you would love to work with, even if money was no object.

I think editors are the true masters of story. I've worked with several very talented people, but I'd like to find the editor who could be my true collaborator on future projects. I'd also like to see some of the great masters at work, like Walter Murch and Thelma Schoonmaker.

On other fronts, I've already been lucky enough to work with some of my favourites: Albert Maysles, Roko Belic, Alain de Halleux. I'd like to see Ken Loach in action, too.

Do you think that you have "made it" in this profession yet? If you don't believe so, what do you think would happen for that moment to occur?

In some ways, I made it as soon as I finished my first film and saw it play in front of an appreciative audience. To me that meant that I could honestly call myself a filmmaker. I feel that way with this film too — when it first got a standing ovation, I was incredibly overjoyed to know that I'd made a film that could show to more

than just my mum and dad and some good friends. Is that "making it"?

Even my documentary filmmaker friends who have been nominated for an Oscar, or won it, don't seem to feel like they've made it. I suppose that's because this is a career with such an uncertain future — unless you're a Ken Burns, nobody is going to hand you an office and promise you a salary forever. I mean Albert Maysles has definitely "made it" but he still has to write film grant applications that are sometimes rejected.

How important do you think the critical/media response is to film these days, be it a large production, independent film or festival title?

Crucial. For an independent film which can't afford big advertising word of mouth is life or death. It's totally unfair, but true. One important critic can make or break a movie (because others will often follow suit) — talk about the tail that wags the dog!

If your film could play in any movie theatre in the world, which one would you choose?

A large open air amphitheatre with great sound, so people could get up and dance if they felt like it. I've heard that Locarno has something like this, but unfortunately I haven't been yet.

Do you have an opinion on the issue of "A Film by (Insert Director Here)"? Is this something you use? Many people collaborate to make a film yet simultaneously, the director is the final word on the production.

At one point during the editing, my editor Mary Myers had done a more truthful version of the opening credits, it included: "A film by Jasmine Dellal & Mary Myers, Roko Belic, Alain de Halleux, Albert Maysles, Elizabeth Mandel, Sara Nolan, Jonathan Gurrin, Mylène Graziano, Katy Chevigny and many many more..." So many people worked incredibly hard on this film and it would have been impossible to do this without them. But we do use that credit in this film. Partly because one of the funders of this film is ITVS, who put films on PBS, and PBS has very strict rules about what wording can be used in front end credits. "A Film by..." is one of the few things allowed.

Also, in the end, everyone else can quit or go home, but the director/producer can never abandon the film. It's that old comparison about a film being like a child that will demand your attention (and work) for evermore.

What would you say to someone on the street to see your film instead of the latest blockbuster playing at the Paramount?

To be honest, I don't think a lot of people need convincing – we're in an era when people are interested in seeing documentaries, as long as they see a good poster or good press letting them know that it exists. And the idea of going to see a film about music and Gypsies is only off-putting to those who would never enjoy it even if they did go. Or maybe I'm being optimistic.... I could try: "It's a fun adventure round the whole world with musicians who'll make you laugh and cry. And Johnny Depp's in it for a couple of minutes."

No doubt there are a lot of aspiring filmmakers at film festivals who are out there curious about making a film of their own. Do you have any advice that you could provide for those looking to get a start?

Indie filmmaking is an insane career – long hours, low pay, no time to see your friends or family while obsessed with a project, and the likelihood that you'll make it "big" is next to nothing. However, it doesn't explain why there are thousands of us out there – and more and more films and filmmakers on all corners of the planet every year. Maybe we're all just desperate to get invited to festivals like Vancouver, and the only way to get here is to make a film.



So... do it! Just do it. If you have something to say, that you really must say, then do it – and someone will want to listen.

And finally...what is your all time favourite motion picture, and why?

Every filmmaker should know the answer to this, perhaps.... I'm afraid I don't.

I love Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* because it takes my breath away and I can't analyze exactly how, even though I've seen it many times, but I discover something new every time in its poetry of images and sounds and words.

I've always smiled at Bollywood musicals, even though I barely speak 3 words of Hindi.

Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl is astounding to me because Johnny Depp's acting [in the film is] phenomenal – he took the role all the way to the edge of caricature but somehow remained within the realm of the believable. I think it's one of the best acting performances I've ever seen.

Andrei Tarkovsky's *Sacrifice* is the first film that made me believe in the power of the big screen.

Raoul Peck's 1991 documentary about Lumumba and his feature about Rwanda, *Sometimes in April* – both of them mix techniques of fiction and documentary to reach a larger truth through tiny details.

When Ken Loach's "The Wind that Shakes the Barley" won the Palme d'Or this year, I jumped up and cheered with pride. Although his films are fiction, they feel to me like great documentaries, where he just happens to be there at the right time and the right place with the camera rolling from a good angle with great light.

Marlon Riggs – all his documentaries are intimate and huge at the same time. So innovative and bold.

Satyajit Ray, Akira Kurosawa and too many more....

The 25th Vancouver International Film Festival runs from September 28th to October 13th, 2006. To see when this film is playing, and for more information on other screenings, happenings and what is going on at this year's VIFF, point your browser to viff.org. – Jason Whyte, jasonwhyte@efilmcritic.com

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