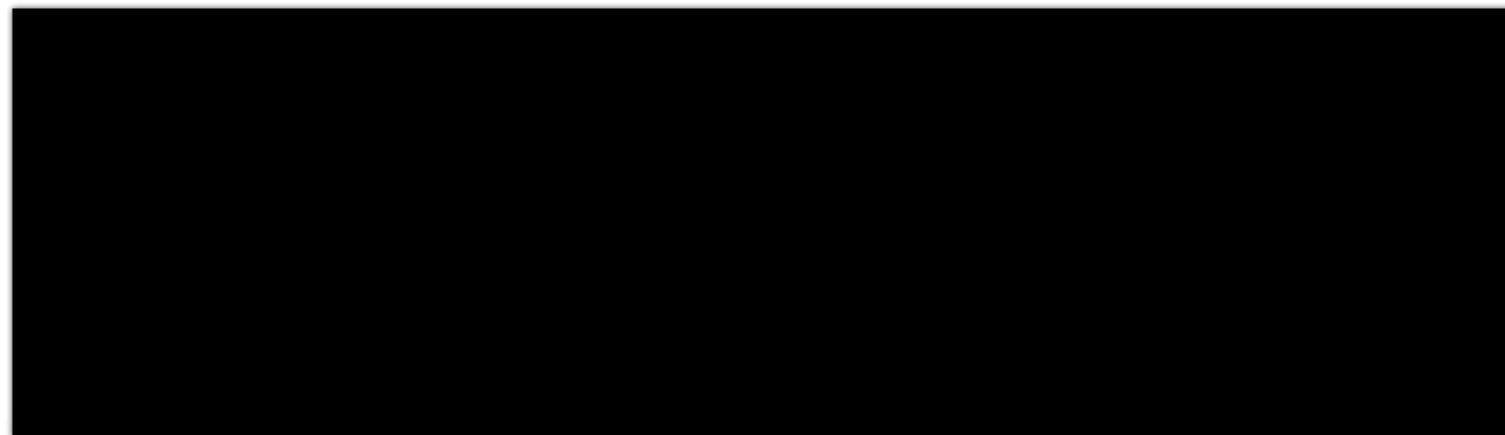


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Grindhouse



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When the Road Bends: Tales of a Gypsy Caravan

Posted by [Canfield](#) at 11:16am.

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Mike Hertenstein is a fellow film critic who was kind enough to cover this for us here in Chitown. If only I could get him to do so more often. Alas he spends a majority of his time chasing muses of a decidedly more philo sort but I think you'll agree that his abilities as a film reviewer would be more than appreciated here.

This film is generally referred to as Gypsy Caravan, though the actual title is When the Road Bends: Tales of a Gypsy Caravan. It's marketed as a "Buena Vista Social Club for Gypsy music", which isn't a bad pitch. After Jasmine Dellal, director of the documentary American Gypsy, caught the World Music Institute's first "Gypsy Caravan" tour in 1999, she made the pitch to legendary Albert Maysles and for the 2001 follow-up tour, the two joined the caravan. Five years of production and post later, the finished film follows five musical acts on a six-week tour of North America, onstage, backstage and further backstage to the home cultures and families of the musicians. Throughout, of course, there's lots of great music in a diversity of genres and moods. The diversity is so great, in fact, that an early attempt to pull together a concert finale that includes everybody threatens to dissolve into a chaos of discordant languages and styles. By the end of the tour and the film, they know one another well enough to play each other's music and we know them well enough to feel like we might be able to dance along wherever they take us.

The very name "gypsy" suggests a nomadic lifestyle: starting from (most believe) India, the gypsies spread over the centuries across Eastern Europe all the way to Spain. The film begins in Rajasthan, in northwest India, in a village where the children are already singing the old songs. The village is home to the group Maharaja, who drum and warble their hypnotic Indian folk fusion. At the Eastern limit of European continental diaspora, gypsy music and dance in Spain is what we call "Flamenco". The El Pipas are an old and well-traveled family of Andalucian musicians; the current lineup features Antonio's staccato dancing and Aunt Juana's raw and throaty wail. Juana must be one of the few female vocalists who could hold her own against the real diva of this tour, Macedonia's Esma Redzepova. The "Queen of the Gypsies" is a veteran performer who knows what she's got (stellar pipes in a sturdy housing) and knows just how to work the crowd.

For others on the tour, the contrast between showbiz success stands in much sharper relief against their home lifestyle, more representative of a still-marginalized, reviled, and often very poor people. The two Romanian groups support their entire villages with their music. Taraf de Haïdouks ("Band of Brigands") and lead fiddler Nicolae Neacsu were featured in the 1993 documentary Latcho Drom, a Gypsy Fantasia made up of mostly just music. Here, we get to know Nicolae more personally and poignantly as the gnarly and nearly-octogenarian putters around his house in the Southern Romania village, for whom the band has become the communal breadwinner. Fanfare Ciocarlia, whose frenetic brass fusion (call it "Gypsy punk") was featured in the film Underground, also come home to Romania: proceeds from their touring and CD sales have built a road, a church, and brought electricity to their village. Under Communism, Fanfare could only play weddings on weekends; since the Revolution, like Taraf, they've been taking their music around the world. As for anyone else, the success of their music may ultimately prove a mixed blessing for both the music and the communities from which it springs; for now, these gypsies seem to maintain their connections: Esma was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize for her benefit work, including raising dozens of orphans (some of whom have grown up to perform with her) and raising money for Roma refugees made homeless in the Balkan wars.

Among gypsy diversity, one common thread – aside from an art that gives voice to the very Life Force – is a deep well of suffering: gypsies know well the troubles that chase all inassimilable Others down a neverending road, but they also share more universal pains. Juana Di Pipa relates here some private sufferings and draws from unimaginable depths to pour out Psalms of Lamentation:

I can't take it anymore
 Every sighing brings no relief
 This is my last breath
 O Lord sing life into my heart
 So that I May Praise You...

Yet, as always, the lamentation of gypsies alternates with the explosive exultation of those whose heights match their depths, and are perhaps made possible because of them. When the Road Bends: Tales of a Gypsy Caravan is dedicated to the "Decade of Roma Inclusion" (2005-2015), a broad-based effort to improve lot of Roma across Europe. You'd think that learning to know and love gypsy music would be a guarantee among gadjos (non-gypsies) against discrimination and abuse. Sadly, this has not been the case, as Latcho Drom director, the part-Roma Tony Gatlif depicts in his Gadjo Dilo, the story of a young man who loves gypsy music but comes to question his own hypocritical consumption of a music whose vitality and passion may partially emerge from their tragic experiences at the hands of nations who now pack auditoriums to hear them sing.

Be that as it may, Gypsy Caravan is a finger-snappin', foot-stompin', bling shakin', and sometimes heart-melting delight: let's hope it helps keep building those churches and roads and putting food on the table for those back at whatever home these families can make of existence on a seemingly endless road.

-- Mike Hertenstein

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