

When the Road Bends... tales of a Gypsy Caravan

Adèle Eisenstein in conversation with director Jasmine Dellal during the 14th Titanic Festival
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How did you find the balance between music and narrative?

Well, before I started making this film, I actually watched a lot of concert films. And I realised, I don't really like concert films. When they're full of music, I just feel frustrated because I'd rather see the real music. Live music is always going to be better than even the best filmed music. So I thought that the film has to give something which the live music doesn't. But it also has to have enough of the music, that you can feel it and enjoy it, and you know that the film respects the music. Sometimes I really wanted to let things play out longer, but it's a really difficult balance. But wanting to hear more is definitely a better state than wishing you'd heard less... It's simple: there are five bands in one film, so just mathematically, there isn't that much time for all the music. So it was a balance between getting more of each song, or fewer songs. My goal in making this film was to show the contrast between the reality of people's lives at home and then the glamorous Gypsy musician. Everybody's happy to hear about a Gypsy musician. It's comfortable for everyone – even if you're totally racist. But I wanted people watching to know that being a Gypsy musician – it's fine that it's fun, but these are also real people, and being Gypsy or Romani is also something that they need to know more about than just musicians. But it was a juggling act the entire time – because we had three things to juggle the whole time: the music, the hometowns and this journey they take together. And in fact, probably when you leave the film, I hope the thing that's going to stay with you the most is the music and the homes. But they don't all fit in the same movie, unless you also have that journey.

How does this compare to your first film, *American Gypsy*?

It's actually totally and utterly different. You might not even think it's made by the same filmmaker. The only similarity is the Roma theme. That film is very much following the story of a particular guy, a particular family, in a particular battle.

Of course, the obvious comparison, which has already been made, is *Latcho Drom*. (And in one month from now, Tony Gatlif's newest film, *Transylvania*, will be in Hungarian cinemas.)

I think that Tony Gatlif was doing something which was this large concept of the journey from India the whole way through, and only through the music. And sometimes even taking the music or the situation and very much moulding it himself, as a director would to create the part of the story that was needed in that country or that part of the journey. My filmmaking is much more that of an observer. I don't want people to perform for my camera. There are many ways to get to "a truth".

Of course, the comparison comes to mind from the beginning, again, starting from India, from the longer, ancient journey...

The film had many, many different beginnings. As with so many films I've heard about, the beginning really did change up till the last minute of editing. But finally, I wanted to do something where in the beginning of the film, you would have the feeling that someone was saying to you, "Are you sitting comfortably? Now we'll begin. Okay. Once upon a time, ..."

So, it's calming and it gives the background...

And what about the title? *When the Road Bends... tales of a Gypsy Caravan*

It's a disaster. It should probably just have been "Rom"...

The title is being used by some distributors and not by others.

It's going to be in cinemas in France and in the US, abbreviated as *Gypsy Caravan*. And in other places, it's coming out as *When the Road Bends*. Which is a mess from a marketing point of view – to have different titles.

It's premiering in New York at the Angelika and the Lincoln Plaza on 15 June. One week later it's premiering in Paris. And then one week later, it's premiering in Belgium.

And it will also be opening in Japan and Australia and Portugal – about a dozen places.

You've been trained as a documentary filmmaker, by Marlon Riggs.

He was a huge influence, and I learned a lot from him. Part of it was just trying to be honest about one's presence in a film as the filmmaker. He didn't feel, for example, that the only person who could make a film about someone who's black and gay is someone who's black and gay, or whatever – which a lot of people do feel. Or that you can only make a film about Roma if you're Roma. It's just important to be honest about the filmmaker's role, and not to claim more authority than you really have.

And sometimes it really is good to have a simultaneous insider/outsider view, as you mentioned, the Gypsies are always inside and outside, belonging and not belonging.

As it helps perhaps to have multiple nationalities – as you said, you are on the edge of all identities, but can feel at home anywhere in the world.

I don't look like an English rose...

You look like an Indian Jasmine.

Both of my father's parents were Iraqi Jews from Baghdad, but he was born and bred in Manchester. My mother's mother was Polish and Jewish, she met my grandfather, who was English and not Jewish, and fell in love, her family disowned her for marrying a non-Jew. Her grandfather was a rabbi. My grandfather's family was also not so welcoming, and he ended up being offered a teaching position at a university in Bangkok. They stayed there for a few years, and during the summers he was working in India. When they were in India, the Japanese were coming to Siam, so someone said it wasn't a good idea to go back to Bangkok, but he decided to go on his own to finish up the term, and ended up in a POW camp for 4 years. And when he came out, the family stayed in India, and my mother now lives in the house that she grew up in, in a village in south India.

How did you get interested in the first place in the story of the Gypsies, or Gypsy music?

I think it was all one whole big circumstantial mistake.

I happened to take a class in graduate school in travel writing. Adam Hochschild was teaching, and he happened to assign a book called, *The Gypsies*, by Jan Yoors, which I was finishing on my way back from a visit to my mother in India. I was thinking about how I had to take a 24-hour journey to get back from India – and then I realised that the Gypsies had made a thousand-year journey from there. I was in Marlon's class at the time, thinking what I was going to make my thesis film about. So I started calling around to see if there were any Gypsies around. Most of them didn't want to talk to me. My family unwittingly helped me pass a lot of tests – it helped to be an outsider.

And I loved the opening paragraph of that book *The Gypsies* – it's beautiful and poetic:

“I want to evoke a mood: the overwhelming immensity of the sky and the timelessness of the moment, where night is merely the continuation of the day; of mud and discomfort and brackish drinking water; of the challenge of constant change, of swirling dust, of too few trees and moaning winds, of the reassuring night sky; of snorting horses, of clustered covered wagons and cooking fires, of playing children and barking dogs, of raiding parties and posses of mounted police; of the simple dignity of the Rom, of their exuberant animal magnetism; of the lake where carp play in the sun, of approaching twilight....”

At the age of twelve, Jan Yoors ran away from his privileged, cultured Belgian family and home to join a wandering band, a kumpania, of Gypsies. For ten years, he lived as one of them, traveled with them from country to country, shared both their pleasures and their hardships--and came to know them as no one, no outsider, ever has. Here, in this firsthand and highly personal account of an extraordinary people (publ. 1967/1987), Yoors tells the real story of the Gypsies' fascinating customs and their neverending struggle to survive as free nomads in a hostile world.

So after you finish organising the soundtrack, what is your next project?

I'm not sure. I might do a film in India focusing on a school my godmother runs which has 3000 children, ranging from children of rich, well-to-do, Non-Resident Indians, to locals, to orphans totally supported by charity or by the state – all together, all religions, fully able and disabled kids, all languages (taught in English, Hindi and Tamil). It's a beautiful place, really inspiring. It's had a huge influence on me.

My godmother and her three sisters had an Indian father and German mother who'd lived in India from the age of 19 onwards.

So they have this Goethe saying by the entrance, which I love, something like this:

“Let none be like another,
Yet each be the highest.
How can that be?
Let each be perfect in himself.”

Have you been back to any of the places in the film after filming?

I'm going back to Macedonia, and I'll be back in Romania in June for the Transylvania Film Festival (Cluj), where there will also be a concert with Fanfare and Esmá. I'd love to go back to all of these places.