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Show review: Caravan of Thieves at Jammin' Java, Vienna, VA

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Caravan of Thieves

Jammin' Java, Vienna, VA

November 21, 2010

The combination of strong vocals, dazzling instrumental prowess on guitar and violin and upright bass, and downright silliness is always a winning combination: these four folks are exhilarating in concert.

Caravan of Thieves is, mostly, a gypsy jazz band. So while you might have plenty of tunes like their perennial opener, the original "Shim Sham," with its jump-blues style chorus vocals and tight structure; "Bouquet," the requisite pretty ballad; and "Rattlesnake," an excellent excuse for frontman Fuzz and Ben Dean to wow you on their guitar and fiddle, respectively, you also get, well, acoustic swing covers things like The Talking Heads' "Psycho Killer" (perhaps not a total stretch for a jazz band) to the song they closed the night out with, a note-perfect rendition of Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody," which I'm now convinced *must* have been originally written as a gypsy jazz number. Perhaps the most impressive instrumental moments are those when the guitar and fiddle play in unison at breakneck speed with impeccable accuracy.

Caravan started out the night with some Stomp-esque banging on homemade percussion kits. They're all suitable percussionists, and though this was fun to listen to, it had only the most tenuous relationship to the show that followed, like when guitarist and singer Carrie played the hubcap on "Rattlesnake."

One particularly fun moment during the night included the singalong maritime medley starting with "Yellow Submarine," into the theme from *Jaws*, replete with some laying on their backs and rolling around on the floor *still playing their instruments*. Even the double bass.

One last note about their live show: This band also has a solid command of visuals and staging. Their interaction with the audience is carefully rehearsed, road-proven, and highly convincing. When they get down from the stage and call the audience into a circle to sing the final number with them, there's not a single person in the house who dares to stay seated.

The live recording the band released over the summer, *Mischief Night*, captures some of the excitement and magic (and all of the impressive chops) of their live show, and it gets closer to the real thing than their studio album that came before it. They do "Girl" and "For the Benefit of Mr Kite" and "You Are My Sunshine," so there's an opportunity to hear some covers of songs that maybe you've never imagined as swing songs. But you can't participate with CD or watch the cute stage antics. Given the somewhat limited scope of their recent touring, it might be the only way for some readers to hear them, and I can highly recommend it for anyone into acoustic music, not just for fans of swing and gypsy jazz. But they are an act *best* experienced in person.

—Jon Patton (Baltimore, MD)

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