

## Caravan's Backstage Brew: Honest Tea & A Secret Rite

BY NICOLÁS MEDINA MORA PÉREZ | JUN 25, 2012 2:41 PM

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NICOLÁS MEDINA MORA PÉREZ PHOTO

Before every concert, the musicians of Caravan of Thieves perform a secret ritual. They can't say what happens exactly, but they admit it involves "a coat hanger, peanut butter, shaving cream, and bare feet."

The gypsy-swing-folk-pop-rock musicians may or may not have performed the ritual Saturday afternoon, before they opened for the national black-string band sensation Carolina Chocolate Drops. The concert took place at the lower Green, on the main stage of the International Festival of Arts and Ideas. It drew a crowd that one festival official described as "one of the largest seen at the festival."

The prime-time main stage gig reflected the dramatic rise of the Caravan, who in past years played smaller local venues like the old [Jennifer Jane Gallery in Westville](#) and a [smaller weekday concert at Arts & Ideas](#). They have since toured the country, played with indie-rock royalty of the caliber of the Decemberists, released three studio albums, and [shot a music video](#). Caravan's members all hail from Connecticut, but looking at them you'd guess they've come straight from Montmartre in 1890. Wearing waistcoats, bowler hats, and lace gloves, the quartet has made a name for itself playing a lively fusion of early European swing, Gypsy jazz, and folk-rock—all with pop sensibilities and the energy of circus performers.



Guitarist and singer Fuzz. Sangiovanni

Judging from their backstage behavior before the Arts and Ideas show, success has not gone to the Caravan's head. There were no mounds of cocaine or eccentric requests for exotic food—just Honest Tea. Band members seemed calm and collected as they planned their show.

"We usually put a set list together in advance," said Carrie Sangiovanni, who sings and plays guitar, holding a crumpled sheet of paper with song names written on it. She went on to explain that the band tries to make sure the show has a narrative flow, with climactic moments coming at the right time.



Guitarist and singer Carrie Sangiovanni.

That's not to say everything that happened on stage that night was decided in advance. As they sat around not planning, the band explained that its commitment to spontaneity is due in part to the influence of jazz, a styles of music centered around improvisation.

"We respond to the audience," said guitarist and singer Fuzz Sangiovanni, as violinist Ben Dean tuned up in the background. "They don't know it, but they are the ones directing the show. Our songs all include designated spaces for improvisation, surrounded by composed music."

That musical flexibility is also reflected in the band's writing style. The Sangiovannis said they sometimes begin with a lyrical idea and other times with a melody, "something we can sing." They then find harmonies and rhythms to fit the voice parts, often reshaping songs many times before coming to an end product. Even then, the Caravan's music is in constant evolution.

"None of the songs are done," said Fuzz, while bassist Brian Andersen texted on his cellphone. "They're always still being written."



Bass player Brian Andersen.

The band's camerino was a sparsely furnished trailer, just a room with a door that locks and a couple of chairs in which to sit—nothing too different from a real gypsy caravan. There, sitting in a wagon that could have taken them anywhere, the Thieves explained that their freewheeling attitude has its origins in the diversity of their musical influence. Besides obvious choices like Django Reinhardt, the band cited acts as diverse as the contents of a traveling salesman's bag: rock bands Radiohead and Wilco; French Impressionist composer Erik Satie; and romantics of the Chopin cut. After the backstage interview, the Caravaners shed its pre-show calm for an euphoric stage persona. They left the trailer/gypsy camp, guitar cases in hand, and went out to play a show as world-trotting as its influences, covers from both Bach and the Bee Gees included.



After Thieves' set, the Carolina Chocolate Drops played well past sundown, keeping the crowd in its thrall with a set ranging from the group's stock in trade—rescued African-American string band and other traditional music from the 1920s and 1930s—to Scottish Gaelic and Haitian Creole numbers. The group won a Grammy last year for its album "Genuine Negro Jig" and has been red hot on the national circuit.

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