



Features

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[Caravan of Thieves: "Gypsy Swing Meets The Beatles at Tim Burton's House](#)

Sitting on the shore of the Long Island Sound, just miles away from the site where his one-time prominent Bridgeport, Connecticut funk band plays their hometown show each year at the Gathering of the Vibes, Fuzz Sangiovanni can hardly contain his excitement, bouncing up and down with every word he manages to spit out between the smiles.

Once the be-all, end-all for the Northeast jam and jazz scenes, Deep Banana Blackout disbanded in 2003, leaving the guitar player with a lot of time to be involved in countless other projects, both in his own groups and with others. Nothing he came up with was what he really wanted, though. It wasn't until he was working with his wife, Carrie, writing songs as an acoustic duo a year and a half ago that something finally struck the right chord. The songs, filled with percussive, staccato rhythms and graceful, but haunting, melodies and harmonies, became the material for their new band, soon to become known as the [Caravan of Thieves](#). And shortly after they had the concept they knew violinist Ben Dean and double-bassist Brian Anderson would be the ones to fill out the group.

Part of the excitement for the two is just trying to figure out how to describe the music they began creating then, which ranges from the simple "alt-gypsy-swing," to the all-out "Gypsy swing meets the Beatles at Tim Burton's house." More conventionally, at least on their terms, is the "alternative-Gypsy-swing-folk-pop" description, but they won't mind if you come up with something yourself. With the breeze blowing and waves lapping it up on the shore, they talk about the state of music, where their band came from, and where they hope they can fit into what they see as the future of pop music.

You guys had been playing as a duo and with your band Rolla for a couple of years before bringing this together. How did this project come from those?

Carrie: We had been doing Rolla for a few years and Fuzz and I kind of had the feeling, an urge to go back to the acoustic roots that we had started with as a duo, yet change it up, give it a new twist, a new spin, a new approach. I had been listening to a lot of 'Django' Reinhardt, old Gypsy jazz and stuff. Fuzz was like, "Hey, maybe we should combine this really cool swinging rhythm with harmony vocals and pop song writing and see what happens." It was kind of like we went through these phases and then we found the perfect fit for what we do together.

So you wrote the songs and then went out and found people to play with you?

Carrie: Totally. We had known Ben Dean, the violin player, because he had sat in with Rolla a few times and the duo, and we just knew he was an amazing player and we wanted to find a use for him somehow. And Brian, Fuzz has known him for awhile because he played in Raisin Hill on the same scene as Deep Banana and Rolla

actually played with them. I remember seeing him play and he was so energetic and had this great presence. That's definitely the kind of people we wanted to play with us. We needed some characters to fill out the group.

Fuzz: The way it got to this was people were saying that we make a lot of sound for just two people and it was kind of like the idea that we were...the music was real energetic and driving. We weren't doing your typical singer/songwriter thing that's kind of like, oh, strumming the chords and blah blah blah. Not that that's so bad, but it had a lot more of a push to it. And the Gypsy jazz music is all acoustic. When you listen to it, it's essentially a whole bunch of acoustic guitarists strumming away with the violin and the upright bass and they all just stomp and there's this great swing rhythm. We heard that and it was going in that direction anyway.

How do people that haven't heard you before react to your show? Do you get an idea of what people think of the music?

Carrie: It's really fun seeing the reactions of the people who have no idea out of the gate who we are; they just happened to be at the show or saw the name and thought it sounded cool and they have no idea what to expect. They will kind of sit there for a few songs asking, "What exactly is going on, like, I'm tapping my toes, but I don't really understand." But then by the middle of the set they're clapping along and at the end of the night they're just excited and going crazy.

Fuzz: The first stage is just simple like, "What are they doing? What is this music? Who are these people?" We always get dressed up. We definitely don't just stand there and play the songs. We get very animated and roll around on the stage and we get into weird positions and joke with each other and the audience in a way that gets people engaged and laughing and clapping along and singing along and making sound effects and stuff like that. It might be a little like stomp in the way that it's performance art as much as we're a band playing songs. This is all kind of a work in progress, you know, the band isn't that old. It's only been around since 2008 so it's been a little over a year.

When did you release the album?

Fuzz: February of this year. We went around for about a year just playing and we had a CD sampler that we recorded four songs for at the second or third rehearsal. Everybody just clicked right way and we had good chemistry right off the bat. Then we recorded the record in the fall of 2008 and we started leaking songs online, but it wasn't officially released until February of 2009.

Was it challenging touring for a year before officially releasing any music?

Carrie: One of the fun things about this project as opposed to the other ones is the growth is really fast. I was a little nervous at first about the residencies [in Philadelphia, Boston, and Washington DC]. Our agent was like, "Yeah, you're gonna go play at this place in Philly every week in June," and we had never played in Philly and nobody knew who we were and I was like "Nobody's gonna come the first time, how are people gonna come the next four times?" At the first there were like twenty people and the next one there were like forty and the next one like sixty and then it was totally packed for the last two and it was like, "Oh! Okay!"

Fuzz: It's pretty universally accepted, you know, because we've done openers for Tony Trischka and the Tom Tom Club, which is sort of double duty for me, but we did that and we've played with Ryan Montbleau Band. They're all very different types of things, but it connects with all of them and I'm finding that out of all of my post-Deep Banana projects that this has been the most successful and most promising and most likely to stay. People have always had that feeling like, "Oh, Fuzz always does these other things and then it's kinda like on to the next thing," but it's mostly been on to the next thing because I didn't feel like they were right. Big Fuzz wasn't right because it was too much like Deep Banana Blackout and Rolla wasn't quite right because it felt like we were just another rock and roll band that was on the scene and there's a lot of pop rock and acoustic bands.

I like this the most, even outside of or beyond Deep Banana. That's more like a comfortable old shoe. That's a bigger thing that I'm a part of that I like, it's a style that I have always enjoyed, funk and rock and blues, but this as a song writer and a creative contributor is really something where I feel like I'm in my element completely, just because of the humor and the theatrics and I've always loved swing and the Gypsy thing just seems to connect really well and the songwriting seems to come effortlessly. So it's really great and we're starting to get people who have been Deep Banana fans who are coming out now to the show that I think really enjoy it because it is so different.

If you had to give someone a genre that your music fit into or describe your sound to one of these people that have never heard you before, how would you do that?

Fuzz: We've been trying to get this one down. The real trick is trying to condense it. We could give you the long answer, which would be alternative Gypsy swing pop folk, but what we've been trying to call it is maybe alt-gypsy swing. We hope that the alt explains that it's got elements of indie rock. Maybe it's like alt-country.

Carrie: Like, an alternative form of gypsy swing.

Fuzz: And that's what it is really, but it has elements of folk and elements of pop and theater. Our poster says, "Gypsy-swinging, fire-breathing, serenading circus freaks." We did that because while it kind of gives you a longer answer, it kind of colorizes it and gives it something to pull in the potential viewer. The "Gypsy-swinging, fire-breathing, serenading circus freaks" kind of says it all, but in a more colorful way, because it's hard to pull it all in.

How do you pull in all these things that don't necessarily seem like they would go together?

Fuzz: Well, the one thing that remains constant is that we're always writing the same type of song through it, which are these sort of melodic, very harmonized vocals with very wispy and haunting lyrics and melodies that go to it. That is always gonna remain constant and we hope that gives it the common thread. The feels have to change, because you can't be playing all swing all night. It's gonna get a little monotonous, you know, so we're trying to think of different ways to put other sounds in our sound. So far we've gotten that, like we have some things that have a bit of a waltz. You'll see on the record, there's "Bar Isole," which kind of has a waltz to it that sounds sort of Eastern European, and "Angels in Cages" is kind of a waltz-y, circus-y sounding thing. So we bring that element into it so it's not just swing. And we have another thing that's tango that didn't make it to the record, but maybe it'll be on the next one or you can hear it at a show or something.

It's been a work in progress. It started out simply as an acoustic duo, and then, "Oh we've got this violin player; this rhythmic part of our sound is cool, hey, let's do Gypsy jazz, incorporate it in. We've got this cool bass player that can really bring some energy into it," and, boom, there's Caravan of Thieves. And since then it's kind of grown into more theatrical, more extravagant song ideas and covers and show elements and who knows where it's gonna go from there. We talked about expanding the group more in the future, adding more players.

Carrie: We have one that's actually like a sometimes player – Bruce Martin from the Tom Tom Club plays accordion with us and spoons and things like that. We might have him play some junk percussion and build him more into the group.

Fuzz: He's an all around musician, because he's great at keyboards, which makes him a great accordion player, and he's also a phenomenal percussionist. We don't have a drummer and it could be something interesting to bring into the mix. We're never gonna have a drum set, per se, but we like the idea of bringing pots and things to the show.

Carrie: There's never gonna be congas or djembes. It's always gonna be something that people make or that we find. People always bring things to shows, like we'll play a wheelbarrow or whatever [Laughs].

Fuzz: Anything that you can bang on that makes a sound that's maybe not a drum, and that's maybe where the stomp part comes back in. It's like we like the idea of decorating the stage with this junk and this and that and making that our percussion sound as opposed to a drum. I guess Tom Waits is another influence on this. He likes this sort of real open and kind junk yard-y sounding things on his records. The production and some of the percussion is kind of that sound of banging on pots and pans.

You're really going for a stripped down approach, but that still makes it sound like a full and lively band.

Fuzz: Yeah. It's full in its own way. I mean, I guess another reason we started this thing and wanted to get away from the rock band is Rolla and a lot of rock bands you hear sound very processed and produced and kind of like every bit of the edge gets sculpted away and also the soul, in turn, you know? We'd really like to make music that sounds the way it does because when we get together to play, kind of like the way music was in the beginning, like this is the emotion that we exude and this is the sound we exude as players and not as some studio trickery. So we really dodge any – we don't use any effects – we make sure our sound live is just instruments being played and we don't use delays and reverbs and choruses and anything like that. Everything is very straightforward; we want it to be the way the instruments were intended to sound. We use vintage instruments, the two of us anyway, and so we're kind of just trying to get it to sound as real as possible. I feel like that's the big thing that's missing from a lot of today's music, is it doesn't sound real enough, you know?

It seems like to really get the band you have to go see the live show. What was the approach to making the album?

Carrie: We wanted to make an actual album and not just release singles like other people are doing online. If we wanted to make an album, we wanted to make it an album. We actually left off some stuff that was fully recorded. We were like, "Nope, this is not part of this group of songs." So we wanted a concept, that's why the artwork had to be the way it is. We wanted to make sure we got the lyrics. That was always a big thing growing up was having the lyrics to read along. We spent a lot of time on the lyrics. It's not like they're just thrown out there.

Fuzz: That's the thing about the live show. It's like sometimes our show can be a party vibe, but that's usually what we're not doing. Our most successful shows are actually the ones where it's kind of a listening experience, where people might actually sit and listen. For me that's a different experience from the Deep Banana stuff because that was more like a dance party. And one of the reasons I like this more is the material is more important and recognized. In the Deep Banana world and in the live setting it's kind of like the lyrics are secondary, and it's more about, "I just wanna get down; I wanna dance; I wanna party." And I think this is a total party too, but it's just a different kind of party where the material gets absorbed and appreciated more. And we've taken the time to do that. So the record is key because we want people to really get the material and understand it before they see the show.

Is there some sort of central theme running through the album? The songs all tell stories, but do they all tie in together?

Carrie: Sort of, but not really a central theme like The Decemberists have this theme album where it's a love story or whatever. It's not like that, but it's like the album is a bunch of little stories. And "Ghostwriter" kind of just starts it off because it's kind of like the ghost that came and visited us and told us all these crazy tales. So it's the tales that came from the ghostwriter.

Fuzz: The idea was that we have the ghost story to start it all off and everything that follows from that point tells kind of a dark, but comical and satirical type of story. They're all like that. We've been telling the story to people at the shows. We'll say that this is where all the songs come from and we openly admit that we don't have any ideas on our own and without this ghost we can't do it. And that's what the song is about. So that was

kind of the idea behind it and I guess that is the central theme to the record, that the ideas are out of this world and they come from a ghost.

How have bands like The Decemberists helped inspire you?

Fuzz: I think that's what we're hoping to fall into – a band that intrigues people at first and then grows into something more.

Carrie: We don't mind if people hate it, because if you love or hate, at least you're feeling something about it.

Fuzz: You can't be luke warm. It's gotta be hot or cold. I think it means you're not making enough of a statement and that's the thing. You can't be like, "That might be too weird or too risky or I don't know." Then you kinda dumb yourself down and start suffocating your inner voice. We all have that inner voice.

Carrie: If you have that idea and you're too afraid to execute it and you do something else because you think it might be more safe, then you're totally missing the point. So we're kind of like, "We don't care what happens, we just wanna do this." So then it started happening and it started doing really well so it was like, "Awesome," because that's the way to do it.

Fuzz: I'm excited to see how it plays it because we've only been in it for a year and a few months and so far it has gone further in that time than I thought it would.

Yeah it's good to see how different music is becoming more popular and accessible to more people. Do you think that will help you at all?

Fuzz: Yeah. I mean, you look at this cover right here (pointing at new issue of Relix), you know, Wilco is another one of our favorites. We went to go see them this summer on Coney Island and that was a great show. They're just one of those groups that's just really good and not totally like on the pop charts, but a lot of people like them. It's very accessible.

Carrie: I think pop gets a bad rap a lot of the time and has a bad connotation. You think pop and you think Britney Spears.

Fuzz: The pop music we like is The Beatles or Queen which is a little more unique pop, and it's very melodic and colorful and sometimes introspective. I mean, those are the bands we cover [Laughs]. But, that is the thing, if you were gonna say, is we're taking gypsy jazz and combining with that type of pop, the classically influenced very high melodic and imaginative type pop writing that Queen and The Beatles were doing. And that's really the combination, but we don't use it because we're afraid if we say pop, people are gonna think it's cheesy or something.

Just say that you're pop music, but not really pop music.

Carrie: Alternative gypsy swing folk not really pop but sort of [Laughs].

Fuzz: Yeah, but pop in the way that this [The Beatles, Queen] is, you know? It's silly really, and that's why the whole description thing is kinda crazy. Another description that we've used which helps too is, "Gypsy swing meets The Beatles at Tim Burton's house." And that kind of sums it up in a couple of words too. That's kind of what it is also. If you use those music industry standard monikers like alt-gypsy swing, it's like, "Okay," but if we wanted to say it another way, that really says it a lot better

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