

MUSIC PROFILE: Caravan of Thieves

By Willie Clark on February 21, 2012

As the adage goes, it takes a village to raise a child. But for the musical offspring of Fuzz and Carrie Sangiovanni, it took a caravan.

It started as a love story. Carrie was living in Burlington, Vermont, and Fuzz just came up and said hello. That one hello must have been enough: five months later the couple was engaged, and the two started making music a month after that.

"It was very fast. We met and we took off from there and didn't look back," Carrie says. Although they had no way of knowing it then, the road on which the couple took off would lead to channeling ghosts to help write songs, imported Japanese secrets, and a band that combines the best aspects of street performance, theater, and the lush sounds of gypsy music.

Playing music was something the newlyweds could do together. They both sang and played guitar, and started with random outdoor and busking gigs. In 2008 the couple added violinist Ben Dean and double bassist Brian Anderson to the group. Caravan of Thieves was born.

The street-performance background certainly shines through in current Caravan of Thieves shows. Members bound around the stage, decked out in frilly clothes, top hats, suits, and dresses seemingly from another era. The musicians dance and fly past one other, arms flailing as they strike guitars, beat against the string bass, or smash tin pots and pans lying about the stage. Solos pass flawlessly from player to player.

The result is a whirlwind of sound, mashing together searing violin licks and thundering string-bass bellowings. Above all the strumming and sideshow spectacle sits the Sangiovannis' sultry voices, captivating in their harmonies. Lock up your children and women: Caravan of Thieves is on its way to Rochester, stealing hearts and minds alike.

"**We like to think of ourselves** like a street performance for the stage, and it's something we can do completely unplugged," says Fuzz, calling from Connecticut.

Think of Caravan of Thieves as an acoustic Gogol Bordello, an American Crooked Fiddle Band, or jazz improvisation sped up and dosed with musical steroids. Or, as the groups put it, "If Django Reinhardt, the cast of 'Stomp,' and The Beatles all had a party at Tim Burton's house, we would be the band that they hired," Carrie says.

"More simply stated, sometimes we'll just say gypsy swing or gypsy folk, or something like that," Fuzz says.

The band's time on the street helped hone Caravan's shows into well-oiled creations, something like musical pageant. Carrie is the only member with an acting background, but all the members of the band have had performance experience, some of them classically trained. The group members dismiss questions about who creates the group's stage choreography. As complex as the live performances might be, they're just a natural evolution of the onstage and offstage interactions of the band.

"We didn't want to be mistaken for a reserved gypsy-jazz band or a jazz-acoustic band," says Fuzz. "Our vision of gypsy is very wild and free and gunning for it, and I think that it comes off theatrical. We've never really said to ourselves, 'We're

going to make a theatrical performance out of this.' But it just comes off that way. A lot of musicians normally would just stand there and play their instruments, but we look at it a lot more visually."

The only thing that Caravan is missing is a drummer, but the band more than makes up for it with its elaborate percussive hoe-downs. Although there's nobody behind a traditional drum kit, the band travels with an entourage of percussive instruments. So many different pieces, in fact, that the Sangiovanni's aren't exactly sure of the number.

"I've never counted them," Carrie says.

"Ten or 12 maybe?" Fuzz says. "Things that we kind of bang around on, some attached some we just kind of hold in our hands. It's kind of an array of kitchen things and garage things."

"When we started we had sort of a no-drum policy. We're never going to get a drummer, not even a guy who played congas or something like that. So this was almost a loophole, though it works for us, because we like to have the street performance...it's something that's very trash can-y," Fuzz says.

The collected items that have become percussive parts of the Caravan set include two pans, a bucket, a tissue box, another pot, and a hubcap. Oh, and the bucket-colander-hubcab. Can't forget that.

"And it's acoustic. Playing a pot is acoustic," says Fuzz.

As odd as it might sound, the band doesn't compromise sound quality in even the smallest pieces of its ensemble. Even the buckets are microphoned at a Caravan of Thieves show.

Mic'd, but still acoustic. Larger venues and halls require the group to amplify and microphone its instruments, but Caravan still sticks true to the acoustic roots of the band. There's flexibility in acoustic sounds that the group can play anywhere, with or without having to rely on electricity.

At one show the band actually had to put that into practice. Caravan was performing at the Iron Horse Music Hall in Northampton, Massachusetts, when the power went out in the building. "We wound up finishing the last half of the set with a few candles lit and doing the whole thing completely unplugged," Fuzz says. "It was pretty neat to have that opportunity, but that's the idea. That we can do the show - of course we plug in and put it through a sound system, because it needs to be amplified for bigger rooms. But it's more of the concept of it."

While myriad concepts have all funneled into the band's musical style, the group is eager to share credit for the concepts of its songs. When Caravan of Thieves gets stuck, it turns to ghosts for help.

"Well, it's always there, it's always with us. It's really, if you want to say it, our silent partner," Fuzz says of the spirit on which the band calls. "It's been there ever since the first album, you know. That's why we have a song called 'Ghost Writer.'"

And for the ghost stories, well, who is to say they can't be true? Caravan of Thieves writes the kind of music that can get stuck in a listener's head, creating sweet melodies that have that lasting power. Perhaps the ghost is a necessary secret to the band's success.

That isn't the only secret the band is keeping, however. When questioned about any pre-show habits or rituals, the mystery only deepens.

"We can't disclose that, but we have something that we do every show," Carrie says.

"It's totally ridiculous," Fuzz says. "Let's put it this way: we brought it back from Japan."

But what keeps the group coming back to stage after stage, street after street, isn't the ghosts, Japanese imports, or the laundry list of cool found objects in the percussion collection. It's the family that has developed, seeing the child of an idea they had with the band connect to audiences.

Caravan of Thieves started with a love story, and now it continues to be one that has taken on a life of its own. "What I always come back to when we're on the road, and we play a show - at the end of the night everybody's smiling," Carrie says. "And it feels awesome to be able to do what you love and actually have other people love it with you, and make them happy with that. I think that's one of the most rewarding parts of it."

Caravan of Thieves

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