



What's New in Princeton & Central New Jersey?
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Blend Pop and Rock, Stir in Acoustic Gypsy Jazz
by Susan Van Dongen

Talking Heads, meet Django Reinhardt, the early 20th century pioneering jazz guitarist and central figure in what is sometimes called "hot jazz." This might be an apt way to describe Caravan of Thieves, a quartet of virtuosos who have succeeded in blending pop and rock, acoustic gypsy jazz, musical theater, maybe a little vaudeville here, a little Goth there, with a touch of found-object percussion. Does it all work? It sure does, especially in the group's live performances.

"If Django Reinhardt, the cast of 'Stomp,' and the Beatles all had a party at Tim Burton's house, Caravan of Thieves would be the band they hired," is how the band describes itself on its website. Another online description: "Gypsy swinging serenading fire-breathing circus freaks!" Maybe not with the "fire-breathing" part, but the swinging, serenading, and general mania part will be in store when Caravan of Thieves performs on Sunday, April 17, at the Record Collector in Bordentown. The Ragbirds will open this all-ages show.

So convincing is Caravan of Thieves's gypsy sound and esthetic, you wonder if Fuzz and Carrie Sangiovanni — husband-and-wife co-founders, guitarists, and lead singers — have ancestral roots amongst the Romani people, in the land of caravans, tambourines, and violins. The answer is no, but absorbing and falling in love with the music seems to have been by destiny. "We admired the music and studied it a bit," Fuzz says. "It came to us later in life, and we had to go around the block a few times to land in this."

Both Sangiovannis acknowledge the influence of Jean "Django" Reinhardt, who really was born into a Romani family. Fuzz says they were even more interested in Reinhardt's influences, however. "In studying Django's biography, we realized his influences were ours as well — early American swing from the 1920s and '30s. The gypsy jazz came in a little later for us. (Before Caravan of Thieves) Carrie and I were doing acoustic guitar duos, a lot of folk, blues, and rock, but we have classical backgrounds too, as well as composition. Eventually the rhythm and style of gypsy jazz worked its way into what we're doing now, but the foundation was playing and singing, working on harmonies and melodies. But just by listening to gypsy jazz, we decided to try this."

"There are other groups out there doing their gypsy thing, but we have a strong background in rock and pop, for example, the Beatles are a huge influence on our harmonies and songwriting," Carrie says.

"Before we did Caravan of Thieves, we did so many other styles. So, while swing is the underlying base, we also wanted to keep the rock and pop influence."

Fans of hot jazz will also recognize the inspiration of swing violinist Stephane Grapelli, who famously collaborated with Reinhardt. In Caravan of Thieves, it's violinist Ben Dean laying down the solo string sound. The quartet is rounded out by Brian Anderson on acoustic double bass.

Interestingly, the group does not have a drummer, but they all pitch in on found-object percussion, which could be anything from a set of hubcaps to a wheelbarrow. Audience members are invited to bring something unusual to the stage for the gang to bang on, as long as it's not too big. "At a concert in Ann Arbor, someone brought a wheelbarrow down to the stage, but that would be hard to bring on the road, since space is limited," Fuzz says. "I guess you could say

we've refined our junk. We've come up with a way to break it down, make the percussion a little more compact. But if you want to bring something to the stage, you're invited. It's an ever-growing project, bringing used percussion into our music."



From left: Fuzz Sangiovanni, Carrie Sangiovanni, Ben Dean and Brian Anderson

Besides the dazzling music, Caravan of Thieves is known for its theatricality, performing while dressed to the nines, posing for photos like they're going out to the hippest Halloween party you can imagine. One photograph has them throwing a wine-and-fruit picnic in a graveyard, with dramatic makeup and costumes, kind of a Goth version of the Manet painting "Dejeuner sur l'herbe."

The theatrical side of the group came easily, both Sangiovanis says. "It's not just a concert, it's very theatrical, and (film director) Tim Burton is a big influence," Fuzz says. "We don't just get up and play, we really want to entertain. I've been doing gigs since I was 14 years old, and I've always liked to be more animated. I always liked guitarists like Jimi Hendrix and Eddie Van Halen, the ones who really like to put on a show."

"The songs themselves are really little stories," Carrie says. "We have a lot of humor and play off the audience, and by the end of the show, we have a lot of inside jokes with the audience. We want to break down that wall; the experience is very interactive."

Aside from their creative originals, showcased on the self-released 2009 studio album, "Bouquet," Caravan of Thieves can rip into some singular covers, such as those featured on their live CD, "Mischief Night" (2010). Listen for Talking Heads' "Psycho Killer," J.S. Bach's "Tocatta in D minor," and Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody."

"'Bohemian Rhapsody' isn't too much of an oddball cover for us because Queen is a big influence, the way they mix the classical and the rock and the theatrical," Carrie says.

"Our covers are all so different from the original versions, though, because we've taken them and changed them up,

made them fit with our sound,” Fuzz says. “We offer something really different. You’ll recognize the melody, but we’ve taken it, pulled it apart, and put it back together.”

Carrie grew up in Somers, NY, where her father is the foreman for the town’s department of parks and recreation. Her mother is a writer, and was very involved in local theater when Carrie was younger. “My father is also a musician who writes and records and performs his own music, so he was a big influence on me, started me on guitar,” she says. “My mother loves music and theater, but she was more on the production end of it. I’ve been performing since I can remember. My mom says I was always singing.”

She graduated with a B.A. in music and theater from SUNY Plattsburgh in 2002, but also studied outdoor recreation. “That’s a combination of environmental science and activities like rock climbing and kayaking, which is another of my passions in life: being outdoors,” she says.

As a child, Fuzz lived in Queens, then Long Island, where his father worked for the New York City transit authority and his mother held support positions in various law firms. His was also a home filled with music and a bit of theatricality. “My dad loves music, he’s a crooner, really into the Rat Pack,” Fuzz says. “I grew up watching him get up and entertain a roomful of people at any time. They were older parents, and their influences went pretty far back — Nat King Cole, Brazilian pop/jazz from the ’60s, quite different from what I was into.”

Fuzz went to Stony Brook University on Long Island, intending to study psychology, but aware that the school also had a good music program. “I figured I’d take music courses too and studied classical composition and arranging there,” he says. “Eventually, I ditched psychology and graduated in 1994 with a degree in music and English. When I graduated, I didn’t want a ‘J-O-B’ type job, so I pursued music seriously to see what would happen.”

He spent more than a dozen years touring the world with funk and dance groups such as Tom Tom Club (with Chris Frantz and Tina Weymouth, formerly of Talking Heads), and his own group, Deep Banana Blackout. Fuzz later met Carrie, who was singing and playing in the Burlington, Vermont, area, and the two teamed up in 2004 to create an acoustic duo and their full band Rolla. In those early years, they developed their songwriting and vocal harmonizing skills together and released two records. Eventually, things jelled for Caravan of Thieves.

“Carrie and I met and dated, and the music just merged from being a fun thing to what we have now, a serious project,” Fuzz says. In June, they will celebrate their sixth wedding anniversary. They now reside in Bridgeport, CT.

Speaking of anniversaries, Fuzz says March, 2011, was the third anniversary of Caravan of Thieves’ first live show. The group has come a long way, quickly, it seems. “Some bands take a while to get off the ground, because they have to figure out what they want to be when they grow up,” Fuzz says. “But we were doing stuff before Caravan of Thieves. We were incubating this idea and had players in mind, so we hit the ground running.”

Caravan of Thieves and the Ragbirds, The Record Collector Store, 358 Farnsworth Avenue, Bordentown. Sunday, April 17, 7:30 p.m. \$20; \$15 in advance. On the Web: www.caravanofthieves.com. 609-324-0880 or www.the-record-collector.com.

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