

Gypsy Zeitgeist: Vengo and other Films by Tony Gatliff

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Occasionally a film maker succeeds in capturing an authentic aspect of human life and culture. That is always a triumph, in this age of formulaic plots and endless pre-quals and sequels. The obscure and intense movies of [Tony Gatliff](#) certainly qualify as modern screen gems. Gatliff weaves colorful and musical tapestries of European Gypsy life that are powerful portrayals of one of the oldest and most misunderstood cultures on the planet. The [Roma](#).

Gatliff's 2000 film, [Vengo](#), is set in a dusty Gypsy village in southern Spain. Almost all of Spain's passionate, Flamenco music is performed by Gypsies. And Vengo is notable for the abundance of raw, authentic Flamenco performances that are showcased in the film. Even grandma, La Abuela, gets into the act with an *a capella* performance that couldn't possibly be any more emotional. The Rhythms of Flamenco come from the soul of Spanish Gypsies, and this movie gives viewers a glimpse of what that really sounds, looks and feels like.

Vengo also is a powerful exploration of the role of family honor, and the age-old practice of blood feuds among ancient cultures that disdain modern law and authority. The title of the movie, in a classic play on words, suggests that "vengeance" is "coming."

Gatliff's early work include two films that are often cited as the definitive cinematic reflections on Gypsy Zeitgeist, [Latcho Drom](#) and [Gadjo Dilo](#). Latcho Drom charts the journey of the Roma from their beginnings in the state of Rajahstan in India; through the Middle East, up the Balkans to Central Europe - ending in France and Spain. Understanding this journey, and the role of music in the lives of the travelers, is key to appreciating the roots of Gypsy culture.

[Gadjo Dilo](#), literally translated as "crazy outsider," centers around a story of a young man - the protagonist - who embarks on a journey from France to Romania to try to find a singer that he discovers on one of his late grandfather's tapes. In the process, he learns a lot about the life of Gypsies in Central Europe, the cultural bias and ghettos; falls in love; and discovers the full range of Romanian Gypsy music.

An examination of European Gypsy life couldn't overlook the famous Manouche Clan of French Gypsies. This clan forever changed the face of Jazz with the musical improvisations of Django Reinhardt and his group: The Hot Club of Paris. Gatliff's [Swing](#) introduces Max, a well-off traditional Parisian sort who encounters an engaging young woman who introduces him to a new world of life, love, music and culture. Both [Gadjo Dilo](#) and [Swing](#) employ the device of a "stranger" falling in love with an exotic, young Gypsy woman. The Gypsy culture is very different from traditional western societies, and must be understood outside of that context. The persistence of young love provides a mechanism for unfolding the process, level-by-level. Not for the easily distracted, these movies are highly recommended.

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