

Petr Nuska, director. *Hopa lide: A Collaborative Documentary About with Romani Musicians from Slovakia*. Slovakia, 2023. Documentary film, 89 minutes, colour, in Slovak with English and Russian subtitles. URL: <https://hopalide.nuska.me/>

Review

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The opening shots of the documentary movie *Hopa lide* unveil, in a nutshell, the whole essence of the film we are about to see and contemplate. Our viewer's perspective is navigated by a handheld camera moving through an audience that is excitedly awaiting a concert in front of a large stage somewhere in Slovakia. In the background, we hear the musicians from a Slovak-Romani band Sendreiovci on the stage testing their sound. The camera then goes around and enters the stage from the side, and the cameraman asks the first musician he meets there, "Maťo, what are you playing today?", to which the latter responds, "I wish I knew." Then after a few more exchanges between them, the same musician, Martin Cibula, asks the cameraman surprised but with delight, "You are filming me?", to which Petr Nuska, the filmmaker and cameraman, replies, "Yeah, just like always." The camera then goes around the stage, asking everybody else what they will play. Nobody knows the answer, until Nuska addresses Martin's father Barnabáš Cibula, who explains, "This is what Sendreiovci are like, we just meet and play, and that's the art of making music!" After a few more moments, Barnabáš Cibula opens the concert with a strong, loud, and heartfelt voice, singing in a Romani language and outlining the introduction to a song, while being accompanied on electric bass and synthesiser with richly decorated modern jazz chords. After one minute of this outstanding vocal introduction, a synthesiser switches to laying out thumping electronic house beats that make a transition to the main theme of the song, as the camera cuts to a scene with a river and a boat in Germany (while the music simultaneously fades out), where some of these musicians are making a living playing music for tourists.

This short but richly textured introduction delineates some of the main themes of the documentary movie *Hopa lide* where we encounter up-close a number of individual

Romani musicians from Central Slovakia and their contemporary music styles blending diverse, traditional, and contemporary musical influences into a compact and effective form. Moreover, the film opening also initiates the viewers into the format of the movie, which will closely mirror the format of the Romani music-making it portrays, and therefore establishes an improvisational, casual, and interactive atmosphere that pervades the *Hopa lide* movie experience from beginning to end.

This dynamic and innovative cinematic approach exemplifies, on the one hand, the culmination of the director Petr Nuska's academic talents and skills, which he developed during his PhD studies in visual anthropology at Durham University in England – Nuska is otherwise a Czech visual ethnomusicologist, currently employed at the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava. On the other, it shows the author's longtime and intimately friendly relationships with the Slovak-Romani musicians he was visiting and researching for five to ten years before making the movie about them.

The movie's three main chapters that appear after the aforementioned introduction follow multiple storylines. On one level, they present three different Slovak-Romani musicians or groups and their everyday lives as people and musicians. The first chapter focuses on the Cibula family of musicians from Hnúšťa, whose younger members work as seasonal musicians on tourist boats in Western Europe. The second chapter depicts a talented and ambitious 20-year-old cimbalom player Dalibor Cibula from Klenovec (no known relation to the first family) who comes from a Romani music family, has Western art music training, plays in a Slovak folklore ensemble (Vepor), and composes his own pop songs. The third chapter centres on Vladko Sendrei from Kokava nad Rimavicou, who simultaneously appears as a local Romani activist and community organiser as well as a leader of a nationally popular Slovak-Romani music group Sendreiovci (several Cibula family members from the first chapter also play in this ensemble). All these individuals are in the movie not only presented as exemplary Slovak-Romani musicians, but also as noble people radiating emotion, care, humour, hard work, dedication, and dreams.

Parallel to these visual ethnographic portraits of individual Slovak-Romani musicians runs a second storyline showing these musicians going through a process of filming a music video of one of their songs: Martin Band a Barnovci (2022), a group including Martin and Barnabáš Cibula, recording "Ja chcem dnes spievať" ("I Want to Sing Now"), a reworking of Queen's "I Want to Break Free"; Dalibor Cibula & friends (2022) laying down Dalibor's own composition "Tak šancu daj" ("So Give It a Chance"); and Sendreiovci (2023) working on the movie's title song "Hopa lide lide." In this way, we also see them rehearsing their songs, recording them in studios, and filming them in various locations, and in between, we also witness them doing soundchecks, having pre-concert band meetings, playing gigs, and organising and promoting their events. Moreover, the movie also zooms in on the lyrics of these songs, all of them deeply meaningful. The first two addressing anti-Romani racism and discrimination and how to overcome them through music and song, and the third one celebrating Romani identity and community. Interestingly, the final music videos are never fully shown in the film

as we only see the process of making them, but not the final product (except for very brief hints). However, these videos form a larger multi-media arrangement with the main movie and should be watched in combination with and as an extension of the documentary film (the videos can be found on the official page for the film).

While it is possible to comprehend the documentary film as the centrepiece of this multi-media endeavour and the videos as complementing it, it is also plausible that the videos have the same if not greater value for the musicians than the documentary movie itself, since the videos can also be used more directly by them for their promotional purposes (each of the videos so far gained between two to five thousand views on YouTube). Relatedly, the whole multi-media project is envisioned as a collaborative film making experience in which the musicians act as screenwriters, directors, and co-creators of their own music videos, with Petr Nuska appearing in the role of a facilitator and documentarian of the video-filming process. However, the whole effort is deeply reciprocal, each side helping the other achieve their music or academic goals, respectively.

Apart from the improvisatory and casual narration of the first two storylines of the movie showing individual Slovak-Romani musicians engaged in everyday music-making activities as well as being immersed in the making of music videos, Nuska also adds a third layer to this cinematographic matter. Namely, through brief but significant filmic fragments scattered throughout the movie, he simultaneously elucidates deeper cultural and ethnographic question-points emerging from this rich cinematic tissue. In this way, we are challenged to contemplate economic and organisational aspects of Romani music making, questions of essentialist vs anti-essentialist Romani identity, the intersection of tradition and modernity, the role of technology (home studios, smart phones), and the wider socio-political context of anti-Romani racism and discrimination. These ethnographic insights mainly appear in the form of brief interviews or casual conversations that Nuska is conducting and recording while musicians are driving their cars, tuning their instruments, or chatting with people on the street, and they are often presented in the form of fleeting but significant quotes and statements that turn the fast-pacing tempo of the movie into brief moments of ethnographic contemplation.

Apart from Barnabáš Cibula's response in the introduction about the improvisational nature of Sendreiovcí's music making, there are at least two such notable ethnographic quotes in each section. For example, in the first chapter, when a jazz-funk fusion song (Justin Lee Schulz's "Do I do") starts playing on the car radio, Barnabáš Cibula exclaims: "This is our music, Peto [Petr Nuska], we don't like Gypsy music . . . This is what we like!" Or, when Dalibor Cibula tells Nuska, also while driving in a car: "I feel very much to be a Rom, you know? And our family is kind of a folklore-Romani family . . . [However], I've found that I really enjoy creating something new." Or, when Vladko Sendrei explains to a person he meets on the street: "I learned Romani when I was 35. My parents guided me that way – they said I wouldn't be a good student if I spoke it . . . My parents discouraged my siblings and me so that we would progress well in school, that's why I got my MA degree in pedagogy." These brief introjections, while seemingly mundane, provide important flagpoles dispersed throughout the movie helping the

viewers making sense of and understanding the Romani musicians portrayed in the movie from a broader cultural perspective, but more in the way of opening questions than offering answers.

Framing all this is a collaborative, participatory, and self-reflective camerawork that places the author Petr Nuska neither outside nor in the centre of the unfolding action, but visibly and audibly on the sidelines, constantly interacting with film's protagonists.

The only two points of critique I have of the movie are the following. First, there is an obvious lack of Romani women voices in the movie. However, as Nuska explains in one of his interviews (Kopecká 2024; communication with author, January 29, 2026), he also wanted to include one female musician in the movie, but the plans did not work out due to the COVID pandemic and other practical obstacles. Moreover, as Nuska clarifies, there are also cultural and methodological reasons behind this unbalanced outcome: "The film would definitely deserve a female protagonist. The problem is that there are very few female protagonists in Romani music in general . . . the truth is that the musical craft among the Roma is still overwhelmingly dominated by men. And as a man, this actually makes my access to the field easier to some extent – because if it were the other way around [Nuska filming Romani women musicians], I would very likely not have succeeded in my ethnographic work at all" (in Kopecká 2024: 12:31).

Second, there is a slight inconsistency in the movie regarding the declared collaborative video-making process which could be made more visible in the documentary movie itself. The collaborative approach only becomes apparent in the film's second chapter when Dalibor Cibula is shown directing the scene for his music video. However, this ethnographically significant video-making undertaking is otherwise more or less imperceptible in the other two chapters of the movie. It appears that music videos are much more based on collaborative filmmaking than the documentary film, except for the fact that the video *mise-en-scènes* were suggested by the musicians themselves and are thus also framing many of the scenes in the documentary film. In addition, the main protagonists also approved how they were portrayed in the movie after Nuska showed them the film cuts and the final product at several screening sessions. Therefore, while not only the videos but also the documentary film is to some degree based on dialogic and collaborative approaches, many viewers might not notice these important features in the documentary movie itself unless they read about them on the movie's official website or in Nuska's articles and interviews (Nuska 2025). Nevertheless, apart from these minor points of critique, *Hopa lide* represents a remarkable achievement in visual anthropology depicting Slovak-Romani musicians and their everyday lives, as well as an impressive cinematic debut for the talented Petr Nuska, who is already gaining praise and awards at numerous film festivals and screenings from all around the world.

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