

Left: a poster for the Woody Allen film which featured Django's music. Right, both taken from *Django Reinhardt and the Illustrated History of Gypsy Jazz*; jamming with his Hot Club de France, with Duke Ellington (centre); a poster for Django's Swing Records releases which appeared everywhere in Nazi-occupied Paris in 1942, where, ironically, jazz had been outlawed

Right: taken from *Django Reinhardt and the Illustrated History of Gypsy Jazz*: Django first played with his Nouveau Quintette at the Champs-Élysées' Cinema Normandie in 1940, approved by the occupying Nazis to distract Parisians from the war

→ BEGINNER'S GUIDE

DJANGO REINHARDT

Dave Kelbie looks at the brief but hugely influential career of the musician who defined Gypsy jazz

There are one or two present-day Gypsy musicians who believe the current status of Gypsy music is due to the enduring popularity of Django Reinhardt, who died in 1953 after a short career during one of the most turbulent times in European history. It's a tall claim – he only recorded traditional Gypsy melody twice – but in the European Gypsy music scene, Django Reinhardt is revered more than almost any other.

His creative range on the guitar is unsurpassed and his influence on its development undisputed, with guitarists

such as Hank Marvin, Les Paul, George Benson, Julian Bream, and BB King all listing Django as a major influence. Before Django, jazz guitar simply meant accompaniment. Duke Ellington claimed Django was the only European with a distinctive jazz voice and certainly the first to have a major impact on American jazz.

Django's legacy has been featured in numerous movies, most notably dominating Woody Allen's spoof *Sweet and Lowdown*, with his music featuring in many others: Neo meets the Oracle to the sound of Django's 'Minor Swing' in *The Matrix*.

Manouche guitarist Jean Reinhardt (the Gypsy name 'Django' means 'I awake') was born 100 years ago this January in Liberchies, Belgium, into a travelling clan of performing Gypsies. His father was a multi-instrumentalist and entertainer, his mother a dancer. They travelled Western Europe as a troupe and first as a violinist, then as a banjoist, Django performed in his father's orchestra. Off-road he was brought up in 'La Zone', the slums surrounding central Paris. His professional career started on banjo, accompanying popular accordion-led bands in the *bals musette* (dance halls). The 1920s saw the first jazz age in Paris but *bal musette* was still regarded as its true expression and Django, from the age of 12, was a much sought-after accompanist. As a Gypsy living on the fringes of Parisian society, the freedom of expression in jazz and its innate rebellious spirit gave him perhaps more than one reason to get heavily involved.

A pivotal moment in his life came in 1928 after a fire in his caravan destroyed much of his left hand. During his convalescence, he taught himself the guitar, developing his trademark technique using only two soloing fingers.

In 1934, with French violinist Stéphane Grappelli, he formed the most original and innovative group in the history of European jazz: le Quintette du Hot Club de France – thereby inventing the style known as 'Gypsy Swing' or 'Swing Manouche'. In 1935 their first recordings were released to huge acclaim. Listening to them now, it's easy to forget what a groundbreaking sound this was. Just the year before, the only two tracks from their first session were deemed too *moderniste* for release. All-string swing jazz with a driving, infectious rhythm from two guitars – and no drums – was seen as maybe too European, perhaps too revolutionary.

They performed throughout Europe to ever-greater acclaim and at the outbreak of World War II were performing in England. However, the band split. Django returned to Paris, leaving Grappelli in London and effectively ending his relationship with the violin. It was a reckless but inspired move.

In 1942-3 whilst Gypsies were being rounded up throughout occupied Europe,

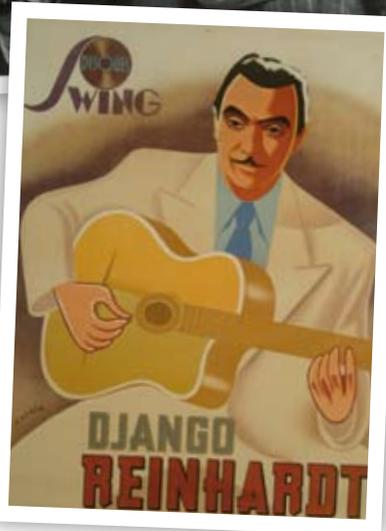


Django flourished in the Nazi playground of Paris. His genius granted him unofficial protection and he became quite definitely the most celebrated musician in France – a precarious place to be for a Gypsy. One of his most famous compositions, 'Nuages', became the French anthem of resistance during the occupation and more than 100,000 copies were sold on its release.

This period of occupation in Paris also ushered in the golden age of jazz, and Django started working with saxophone and clarinet. With this new sound, based on the new swing sounds of American clarinetist Benny Goodman, Django grew as a soloist and composer. He let loose on the recordings of this period with the relaxed confidence and depth of a major star, and even recorded a pure traditional Gypsy melody: 'Les Yeux Noirs.'

The recordings in Brussels in 1942 are arguably the greatest he ever did, and were the start of what is widely agreed to be the most creative period of his life. Other than a couple of tracks with Django on violin, these recordings are all ambitious collaborations with big bands. You get the feeling Django sat at the front and just played his heart out.

After the end of World War II, he was reunited with Grappelli, and any doubt over this remarkable partnership disappeared. They toured immediately and, finding themselves



once again in London, recorded at Abbey Road studios some sides that have a maturity borne out of shared wartime experiences.

For Django, jazz was America, and as the most famous jazz musician in Europe, he sought to conquer it. Finally given the chance in 1946, he toured the US with the Duke Ellington Orchestra. The tour was viewed as hugely successful by all but Django. While the press, audiences and musicians were enraptured, Django became increasingly homesick and was eager to return to France.

Django died suddenly aged 43 in Samois-sur-Seine. Each year on the last weekend of June the town hosts an international music festival in his honour. He wasn't just the first few creaking steps towards guitar virtuosity. He leapt fully-formed as an amazing musician, composer, improviser and character and changed the landscape of guitar-playing in one moment. As the greatest ever Gypsy musician, he may well have even contributed to the success of Taraf de Haidouks, Šaban Bajramović, Gipsy Kings and other artists extending the tradition. ●

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ONLINE You can see a video and hear music from Django Reinhardt on the interactive sampler: www.songlines.co.uk/interactive/066

BEST...

All of Django's recordings are now included in numerous compilations but my favourite is the *Intégrale Django Reinhardt* series by Frémeaux et Associés.

...COMPLETE WORKS



Intégrale Django Reinhardt – The Complete Django Reinhardt (Frémeaux)

This 20 double-CD collection is a lovingly collated historical document of Django's work (chronological by recording date). It can be bought as individual CDs, each with a fantastic booklet in French and English.

...COMPILATIONS



Intégrale Django Reinhardt Vol 3: Djangology (1935, Frémeaux)

This features the first released sides of Le Quintette du Hot Club de Paris with Stéphane Grappelli. It is alive with ambitious arrangements: confident stuff.



Django Reinhardt & The Hot Club Of France Quintet, Brussels 1947 & Paris 1951-1953 (DRG)

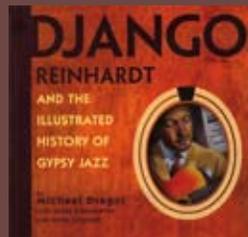
This double CD is late Django at his most fluent, featuring Hubert Rostaing on clarinet.



Intégrale Django Reinhardt Vol 13: Echoes of France (Frémeaux)

Reunited with Grappelli at Abbey Road studios, Django produced an acoustic guitar sound to die for. This disc includes three amazing bonus tracks recorded live with the Duke Ellington Orchestra.

...BOOK



Michael Dregni, Django Reinhardt and the Illustrated History of Gypsy Jazz (Speck Press)

This beautifully illustrated and well-researched book captures not just the spirit of Django, but the whole Gypsy music scene and a forgotten Europe. Reviewed in #65.

...AVOIDED

His few recordings on banjo. Amazing playing for a young teenager but banjo accompaniment of the 1920s isn't everyone's cup of tea.

D Songlines digital subscribers can download 'Minor Swing' by Django Reinhardt and Stéphane Grappelli for free. See p13 for more details

Competition



We have four copies of *Djangologie*, the new 4-CD box set from *Le Chant du Monde* (to be reviewed in the next issue) to

give away. To enter, simply answer the following question: **What year was Django Reinhardt born?**

See p5 for competition rules and address. Closing date April 2 2010.

LIKE DJANGO? THEN TRY...

LOLLO MEIER

Within European Gypsy circles, Lollo Meier from Holland is recognised as the most lyrical guitarist of his generation. He has a technique that is light, airy and full of phrasing, and he performs with a shy confidence.