BOOKS

GYPSY

The life of Django Reinhardt.

By Adam Gopnik

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A happy place to spend a winter afternoon in Paris is a bar called the Chope des Puces, just outside the Clignancourt flea market. Every Sunday, for longer than anyone can remember, two battered, time-worn guitarists have met there to play, on battered, time-worn guitars, popular jazz tunes in the manner of the Gypsy jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt and his Quintet of the Hot Club of France. The ringing chords, the jaunty minor-key-ballade melodies, the peculiar heavy, heartbreak vibrato, the broken-icicle chromatic runs up and down the fretboard, all played against the steady *boom-chick, boom-chick* of the cast-iron guitar chords: the cherished Django sound is there, and something of the feeling, too. Jazz imitators are in general extremely sad—the "Dixieland" players in their straw hats trying to play like Louis Armstrong, the ghost big bands, courts without their Counts and Dukes—yet these Sunday Djangoists, like so many others throughout Paris and the world, are somehow not. There are Djangoist "hot clubs" in Norway and Denmark and San Francisco, playing a near-perfect revival sound, and the now annual Django festival in New York has just concluded at Birdland in pseudo-Gypsy conviviality. Django's manner, seemingly so inimitable, gets imitated with precision: that Hot Club de Norvège is *hot*.

How and why this should be—how an illiterate, happy-go-lucky Gypsy could have created a style that goes on creating itself—is at last the subject of serious study, in Michael Dregni's biography, "Django: The Life and Music of a Gypsy Legend" (Oxford; $35). Dregni, who writes for the magazine *Vintage Guitar*, and whose first biography this is, not only has managed to break into the French milieu of jazz aficionados and sects in which Django worked but has penetrated the Gypsy, or Romany, world from which Django emerged—a clannish world whose existence, well into the nineteen-fifties and sixties, was still largely furtive, outdoors, vagabond, and, occasionally, criminal. Dregni clears up the two much mystified areas of Django's life—what exactly he did during the Second World War, and what really happened on his one trip to America, in 1946—and he sorts through the music and, nice bonus, manages to suggest plots for at least three fine French movie musicals.

"Django" is a Romany word—the first-person singular of the verb meaning "to awake." It was the Gypsy name that Django's mother gave him when he was born, in January of 1910, in a caravan on the road in Belgium. Romany families in those days seem to have given their children both a public name—the new baby's was Jean—and a private name. (This was partly a time-honored way of avoiding conscription; the government not only never knew where you were but never quite knew your name.) Django's family, Dregni explains, were Manouche—one of the two bands of Gypsies living in France in those days. (The others called themselves Gitans.) The Manouche, it seems, were the kind of Gypsies who caused other Gypsies to raise their eyebrows, draw in their breath, and ask if perhaps these people might not be just a touch too wild and unreliable. Django, Dregni emphasizes, was not merely "of Gypsy descent"; he was, and remained, an honest-to-God caravan-and-tarot-card Romany, illiterate until well into his adulthood (and only semi-literate even then), who, when he was a celebrated musician on tour in England, still liked to stroll off into the farmland to wring the neck of a stolen chicken or two.

Django's father abandoned the family when the boy was still young, and Django bounced between his powerful mother and a fourteen-year-old Gypsy girl named Naguine, whom he stayed with, off and on, for the rest of his life. (A brief teen-age marriage to another Gypsy girl produced a child but not a permanent attachment.) They lived on petty theft, fortune-telling, and pass-the-hat music, and what food they could find; the Reinhardt family, in Manouche fashion, had a particular fondness for *niglos*—feral hedgehogs roasted whole with their needles on.

Django picked up a bastardized banjo-guitar when he was twelve, and from a Gitan virtuoso learned the stiff-armed, elbow-dependent technique that produced his loud, clear, ringing style. He was a prodigy, and quickly found work playing in a now long-lost world of popular dance-hall music: the Parisian *bal musette*. Musette was a popular urban style as rich in its way as Chicago blues or Argentinean tango, a complete alternative musical culture, a kind of marsupial jazz, driving and complex. Dregni relates its extraordinary Belle Époque history (it is the first terrific movie he outlines, if only Jacques Demy were around to make it): musette was born amid the rivalry of Auvergnat musicians with their bagpipes, Italians with their accordions, and Gypsies with their guitars, all fighting brutally until an alliance was made between the leading bagpiper's son and the leading accordionist's daughter. Soon the new style was firmly in place—swooning Italian accordionists, wailing French pipers, pumping Gypsy guitars.

That was the style into which Django was inducted from his very first notes. He did not struggle to get to jazz, as one might have thought, from a folk campfire or a tea dance. Instead, musette—with its driven, up-and-down *pompe* rhythms (the guitarist stroking his guitar and quickly palming the vibration) and its *zigeunerweise* minor-key laments, its thick chords, minor sixths and sevenths and ninths—already held within itself many of the elements of jazz. Django came at jazz from a full-fledged folk-art-pop music that already raged and swirled and drove, if it did not yet swing.

Yet Django, content to make whatever music was around, might never have been the man to crossbreed musette and jazz had the famous disaster of his life not happened. In October of 1928, he was caught in a caravan fire, which scorched the right side of his body and burned his entire left, or notemaking, hand. He was more than a year recovering. The pain must have been unbearable, and he permanently lost the use of his pinkie and his ring finger, except as a stiff claw to force around the fretboard. Not only did he have to learn to use his hand again; he also had to come up with an entirely new way of fingering chords, using two or, at most, three and a half fingers where he once had had five. Though Dregni tries to explain it, it still seems a fishes-and-loaves miracle that all those minor ninths and sixths were made by two gimpy fingers sliding up and down the fretboard. The accident was the turning point in Django's musical life; it forced his hand in every sense, and, for a prodigy who had always let his fingers do the thinking, it was clearly mind-expanding when the fingers had to think again. Only after he was nearly stopped from playing music at all, it seems, did he become an ambitious, self-consciously searching musician.

It was in July, 1931, on a pass-the-hat gig in the South of France, that he first heard real American jazz. Historians teach us to be suspicious of "Eureka" moments, but there are moments when something happens to make one say "Eureka," and this was one of them. Émile Savitry, an amateur painter on holiday in Toulon, heard Django play in an outdoor café, and invited him up to his apartment to listen to music, some early Armstrong 78s. Django was hooked, and transformed. "My brother! My brother!" he kept swearing, and he scarcely left the apartment for days. Shortly afterward, back in Paris, he ran into a tea-dance violinist of Italian descent named Stéphane Grappelli, who had had a similar epiphany listening to the records of Armstrong and Bix Beiderbecke. They immediately began jamming together.

Nothing might have come of this—Dregni instances the case of the equally gifted Argentinean guitarist Oscar Alemán, who made a couple of first-class jazz records

in Paris but whose career went nowhere—had it not been for the intervention of the Hot Club of France and its *chefs*, Hugues Panassié and Charles Delaunay. The story of the Hot Club (and this is Dregni's second wonderful movie, a Truffaut comedy) dramatizes as well as any the French genius for recognizing the overlooked greatness of some American folk or pop form and instantly bureaucratizing that love. Panassié was independently wealthy, a jazz aficionado, and belonged to the far right, a monarchist absolutist; Delaunay was the neglected son of the great painter Robert and his wife, the designer Sonia, and was a man of the left. Yet the two Frenchmen, along with a band of like-minded listeners, formed a club (they even obtained an official police permit) based on a passionate devotion to Bix and Louis and Eddie Lang and Joe Venuti. They worshipped music that came from a country they had never seen and was sung, when it was, in a language they couldn't speak—and immediately turned it into a semi-religious avant-garde cause, complete with the requisite excommunications of members for various ideological faults. (One fault later widened to a rift, when Panassié and Delaunay simultaneously excommunicated each other over the bebop question.)

Django, then, was not just a comet; he was a cause. Panassié and Delaunay were looking for a French musician who could play jazz, rather as Sam Phillips, in Memphis twenty years later, was looking for a white boy who could sing black. It made a certain sense that they would lay their bets on Django, who, as a Gypsy, occupied a kind of honorary Negro place. They kept Grappelli and Django together—separately, the feckless guitarist and the insecure violinist might simply have gone on making the rounds of clubs and dance halls—and created the Quintet of the Hot Club of France.

The quintet, it turns out, was as much an "art" exercise as a pop one. At first, at least, it existed largely as a recording band rather than a performing group, and was there as much to prove Panassié and Delaunay's abstract point—that jazz was potentially a universal language—as to make dance records. In fact, throughout the history of the quintet, Panassié and Delaunay exerted a slightly Henry

Higgins-ish pressure on the players. They got their pets to "swing" Bach, Liszt, and the French national anthem (in a wonderful version of the "Marseillaise"), and even encouraged Django, who couldn't read music, to compose a full formal symphony, a bit of which survives as the beautiful slow tune "Manoir de Mes Rêves." (There are comic-satiric elements to Panassié and Delaunay's infatuation; but Panassié wrote one of the first good books on jazz in any language.)
That something is the reflection of a cultural plot need not mean that it is a cultural scam. The marriage of Grappelli's vocal, swooping playing and Django's percussive fire—a new version, as Dregni suggests, of the original *bal musette* counterpoint between the metallic and the liquid—made for something new. They swung and sung, and were instantly recognized in England, first, and then even in America.

The lineup of the Hot Club varied, but usually included Django's brother Nin-Nin on one rhythm guitar, the Gypsy-gangster guitarist Baro Ferret on another (Ferret was by reputation as good a soloist as Django, but Django kept him tightly locked), Louis Vola on bass, Grappelli on violin, and Django on lead guitar. Their sound had two pillars, a French rhythm and a French guitar. The rhythm was that *pompe* taken over from musette; the guitar was the Selmer, and Django's music wouldn't have happened without it. The Great Guitar Problem, throughout the nineteen-thirties, was that the instrument was too soft to be heard over a band. The Selmer *modèle Jazz* guitar, invented by Mario Maccaferri, has a resonator built into its acoustic body. It is a vibrant, jangling, steel-stringed instrument, but capable of soft breezes and overheard whispers in the eye of the hailstorm. In photograph after photograph from the period, Django clutches his Selmer, with its small sounding hole, as though it were his wife.

These recordings of the thirties are the source of the world's Djangomania, and their appeal has something to do with their sheer bounce, the drummerless, up-and-down-the-merry-go-round joviality. But it has something to do, as well, with the melancholy these recordings convey, an emotion that makes the music

distinctly European. American jazz had lyric players like Lester Young, demonic ones like Coleman Hawkins, and incandescent ones like Louis Armstrong, but their swinging songs are radiant with achieved happiness and their sad songs ballads touched by the knowing, essentially stoical sound of the blues. Billie Holiday and Young are jaunty even in defeat, blue but not out. (And you could play "West End Blues" at a funeral or a wedding, as you could play Bach.) An Old World variety of tenuous, bitter, permanent sadness, the Schubertian weltschmerz, is second nature to Django, and seeps through his slow tunes. There's a magical sequence in Martin Scorsese's much maligned "New York, New York" where the Liza Minnelli character, alone and miserable, listens to Django and Stéphane and just sinks deeper and deeper into sadness. Scorsese's instinct is right: American jazz won't let you get that low.

When the war came, a myth came with it. It was said that Django, a Gypsy in fear for his life at a time when the Nazis were sending Gypsies to the death camps, lived a furtive, frightened life on the fringes of French society, occasionally emerging to cheer his fans by striking his guitar. (Grappelli had escaped to England.) It has even been said that Matisse's postwar "Jazz" cutouts were a tribute to the reëmergence of the Gypsy genius.

As with so much else that touches on those tragic years, it isn't so, and what is so is much sadder. Dregni does a very good job of unpacking Goebbels's attitude toward jazz—that as Negro-American music it was debased but as dance music it was important to the war effort—and shows that Django played night after night in Paris, throughout the war, for an audience of cheering S.S. men and German soldiers. (Paris was kept open as a kind of night club for the troops. "Everybody once in Paris" was the promise held out to the Germans on the Western Front.) In fact, Dregni establishes that though Django tried to get out of France on a couple of occasions, he was at the height of his fame and success during the Occupation —he even opened his own club.

In a bizarre turn of history, it was the Occupation, and collaboration, that produced a true mania for jazz in France. That was when—and this is Dregni's third good movie, a sour Malle tragedy—the *zazous*, French jitterbuggers, emerged in Paris, to do at least dance-hall battle with the German soldiers. The *zazous*, tolerated and then suppressed, took what until the war had been a largely highbrow enthusiasm and turned it into a form of popular protest. For the first time, Delaunay had an audience for his music. Since he was not allowed to publish American tunes, he put French names on the recordings; "St. Louis Blues" became "La Tristesse de Saint Louis," the sadness of St. Louis, with a deliberately coded reference to the distant great Armstrong. It was during the *zazou* period that Django recorded his most famous slow tune, the beautiful, lulling "Nuages," which became one of the anthems of the Occupation.

After the war, in 1946, Django made the long-awaited trip to America. By legend, the trip was a disaster: he arrived without his Selmer, never found a guitar he liked, was booed by audiences, and was criticized by an American jazz press that had already moved on to the rockier shores of bebop. It has even been said that he showed up shamefully late for a Carnegie Hall concert with the Duke. He returned to Paris, desolate, and never quite recovered.

Dregni establishes that the trip was, by most standards, a success. Django toured with Ellington. (Ellington's sponsorship may seem puzzling, until one recalls that, as Whitney Balliett has explained, Ellington's genius had always been for identifying instinctive, mostly New Orleans musicians, whose plaintive vocal style he integrated into his own self-made sophistications.) Though Ellington wasn't able to incorporate Django into his band—probably because he couldn't read music—he used him regularly, and most of the reviews were good. ("FRENCH GUITAR ARTIST STEALS DUKE'S CONCERT" read a headline in Cleveland.) It's true that he was late for Carnegie Hall, because he was drinking with the French middleweight Marcel Cerdan, but he played—and since when has a jazz musician's reputation suffered from lateness? ("Tardy: The Complete Boxed Set of

the Late Starters.") He liked travelling with Ellington's band; he liked the loud flowered boxer shorts the musicians wore to sleep in on the train. And bebop, to the degree that Django absorbed it, was, in its breakneck speeds and riffy, nervous agitation, a welcome music to him.

The trouble wasn't that he didn't have his own guitar; it was that the new guitars he had to use to play American concert halls were a problem for him. The guitar-volume problem had been solved, directly, by the electric guitar, which Benny Goodman's guitarist Charlie Christian had instantly turned into a singing, hornlike, bending instrument. Django, more or less compelled to play one, got his hands on an early Gibson electric and played it throughout his American stay. This may explain both the general enthusiasm for his playing—Django once borrowed a clown's metal toy guitar and played it; he couldn't play *badly*—and a certain hollowness to that enthusiasm. Django on electric guitar is still virtuosic (listen to "Blues Riff," one of the few surviving records of his stay with Ellington), but oddly generic and un-Django-ish. He can't punctuate his solos; he stops to make the last note of a phrase ring out and it just glides back into the amplified stream of echoing, fluid notes. He can play his instrument, but he can't make his points. One sees, or hears, why listeners would have been impressed by him without being much moved. And an unemotional Django is no Django at all. When he returned to France, he continued to play, sometimes wonderfully. Dregni makes a strong case for his later, more disciplined electric music, but a lot of the later music deliberately evokes the thirties in a style already archaic. Oddly, it was only after his death, in 1953, that his music began to be imitated. By now, Dregni tells us, Django's jazz *is* Gypsy music, the solos passed on from father to son note by note. He escaped a folk music only to make one.

Which returns us to the mystery—why do Django imitators persist, and move us? Part of it is that the tone, with its signature heavy vibrato, *is* imitable. And part of it is that the time is short; there is not much second- and third-act Django. But surely another reason we respond is that few artists are so tied to a place; Django

is Paris, modern tragic-beautiful Paris, broken Paris, imaginary Paris, fallen Paris, happy Paris, and the emotions of the city still pour out of his music, whoever plays it. When an artist belongs so entirely to a single decade, even the catastrophic decade of Europe from the mid-thirties to the mid-forties, then hearing his music revived revives the era, and reminds us that even the hardest times are human times, filled with music. There is something at once terrifying and beautiful in the thought that, while half a million Gypsies died, this Gypsy jazzman went on making music neither demonic nor mad but merely sad and lovely. By reviving an artist's time, we revive both his resistance to it and his response.

Is there a Django legacy beyond the enthusiasts and imitators? Charlie Christian, for instance, can be heard everywhere in modern jazz guitar, from the octaves of Wes Montgomery to the runs of Herb Ellis. Except in forward-looking revivalists like the Pizzarellis, Django is less audible. The later musician he most resembles is, perhaps, not a jazzman at all but Jimi Hendrix, who is similarly central and sui generis. Hendrix, after all, stepped outside an African-American identity to embrace that of a Gypsy (one of his bands was called the Band of Gypsys), just as Django stepped outside his Gypsy identity to explore an African-American one. Even Jimi's "Star-Spangled Banner" is anticipated by Django's "Marseillaise," and there is a tiny two-bar scrap at the beginning of the 1935 Decca recording of "St. Louis Blues" that sounds eerily like the famous opening stutter of "Purple Haze."

Did the young black bluesman ever hear the old Gypsy? It's hard to think not, and there are passages of mandolin-like, chromatic glissing in Hendrix that do sound distinctively Django-ish. More important, both guitarists have a knack for floating in and out of styles and movements, because they are sound makers before they are note shapers. It is not the note-order of the solos, as it is with Armstrong, or Clapton, but the musical atmosphere that overwhelms one. Django is a "musical impressionist," as Dregni writes, as opposed to a draftsman, and so was Hendrix. And both were essentially lyrical players too often buried by their audiences' need for flash and speed; but listen to Django's famous "Improvisation" and then

Hendrix's equally famous introduction to "Little Wing," and hear the same poetry of full-bar chords up and down the neck of the guitar, and the same ringing, sighing songfulness.

Dregni ends his book in the Chope des Puces bar, near the flea market, listening to the two Gypsy musicians who keep Django's music alive. Their names, it turns out, are Mondine and Ninine Garcia, they are in a direct line of musical descent from Django, and they are, it seems, still playing every Sunday. ♦

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