

# Django Reinhardt: The Journey of the Gypsy King

[*Minor Swing*]

[**Black Slide**]

## **Introduction:**

The ideas of art music and folk music have always been separate and somewhat black and white. The virtuosity of performance and the complexity of composition have largely defined art music—just as simplicity and relatability have done that for folk music. To combine the two styles of music for creation's sake is not a new musical idea, but historically the end product generally has seemed to privilege and to lean more towards art music rather than folk. Django Reinhardt, however, is one of the first musicians to ever take it in the other direction, elevating folk influences to be on a par with classical ones. His ability to take simple rhythms and melody lines and add complex virtuosic guitar improvisation over those melodies are what make the gypsy style so innovative, aesthetically rewarding, accessible, and historically influential. His contributions in gypsy jazz have left their mark on other styles of music such as blues, rock and roll, bluegrass and other jazz styles. Furthermore, if we were to mention the greatest guitar players of the last century, we would have to include Django Reinhardt on the list. **1:15**

## **History of Django and his disability:**

As with most European gypsies, the Reinhardt family was constantly on the move. Therefore, the story of Django Reinhardt's birth is somewhat unclear. However, we do know that he was born somewhere near a little town called Liberchies in Belgium in a gypsy encampment on January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1910. He was named Jean-Baptiste Reinhardt, and as with most gypsy children, he was given a nickname. The branch of gypsies that Django's family was associated with are known as the Manouche. This large group of gypsies traveled from country to country in roulottes, or caravans. From an outsiders' point of view, the life of a Manouche gypsy was one of harsh poverty, hand-to-

mouth existence, and no moral guidance or need for steady work or home base, but to a Manouche gypsy, their lives were filled with family, friends, music, and joy. Without the monotony of the typical work week, they were able to focus their time and energy towards their creativity and talents. Since gypsy children did not have the parental guidance and structure of school, they would spend most of their time engaging in activities well-befitting a gypsy. Dancing, hand-making crafts, and playing musical instrument or singing were some of the more popular ventures for young gypsies to invest their time in.

Django took to music at a very young age and was almost always found listening to the older men of his caravan. At the age of 12, he was given his first banjo-guitar from a neighbor who recognized his interest in music. He would watch other guitar players play and memorize the melodies along with their fingerings, then go home and try to mimic what he had seen and heard. After years of this, he was eventually called out by his father, also a musician, and asked to play what he had learned so far on his banjo-guitar. After Django played a few bars, his father was impressed and Django began learning more complicated music and performing regularly at local bars and nightclubs; however, music wasn't the only interest in Django's life at that time.

At age 17, Django married Bella Baumgartner who made decorative flowers out of paper and celluloid, and they began living together shortly thereafter. One night after a gig, Django returned to their caravan late, dropped a candle amid the hundreds of fake flowers, and set his caravan ablaze. After trying to put out the flames, he was dragged out of his burning home to find the damage had already been done, not only to his house, but to his own body. His leg was badly burned and his left hand was almost unrecognizable. His ring and pinky fingers had been burned so badly that they curled in towards the palm and were completely paralyzed.

**[Start slide show of Django's hand]**

He was immediately taken to a hospital, but left shortly after receiving information that his leg should be amputated. He refused, but was afraid that the doctors would perform the operation without his consent. He was taken to a private nursing home where he slowly began to regain his strength; however, it seemed at the time that Django's guitar playing days were officially over.

### **[Black Slide]**

It was his cousins that decided to bring him a guitar while at the nursing home, and even then, no one was sure what Django was going to do with it. With his two good fingers and his thumb, he began to work around his disability and slowly began to learn the guitar all over again. Just like when he was a child, Django devoted all of his time to perfecting his new playing style, and even became so comfortable with it that he started to perform again. After years of practice and rehabilitation, Django the performer was back. Although at first his disability seemed to be the end of his musical career, it now proved to be something else entirely. His new playing style forced him to play in a very specific, but defining way. His choice of chord voicing and melodic soloing that we now associate exclusively with Django all stemmed from that original injury.

The piece that we opened with today may be one that some of you recognize. It is one of the most famous gypsy jazz pieces ever recorded and it is the piece that Django is most known for. It is titled simply "Minor Swing" and was first recorded on November 25<sup>th</sup>, 1937, almost 10 years after his fateful injury. The solo that I played over "Minor Swing" was the original solo played by Django on that first recording. The only difference between what I have just played and Django's original recording is that I played it with four fingers,

### **[Four-Finger Demo]**

and he played it with only two.

### **[Two-Finger Demo]**

During his rehabilitation, he adapted so well to his injury that he was able to perform almost impossible solos with virtuosic precision. **4:50**

### **The standards of the Gypsy Ensemble:**

After performing for many different nightclubs and bars over the next few years, including a stable job at Les Acacias earning around 100 francs a night, Django was finally stepping into the world of a professional musician. However, this sort of life was unappealing for Django, and he and his brother Joseph Reinhardt, or “Nin-Nin”, journeyed toward the south of France performing along the way to help support themselves. This life of wandering and independence suited Django much more than that of hopeless dependence to money and luxury. He viewed money as something to gamble with, or just give away. It wasn’t something to save and it definitely wasn’t something to work for in order to attain.

One afternoon, while playing at the Café des Lions, Django and his brother were overheard by Émile Savitry while playing for free drinks and a meal. This fortunate meeting allowed Django to be truly introduced to American Jazz for the first time. Savitry invited Django and his brother back to his apartment over the cafe where he played the Reinhardt's albums by Duke Ellington, Eddie Lang, and Louis Armstrong. This made a huge impression on Django and also hatched a new idea into his already brilliant mind.

Over the next few years, Django would record with prominent jazz artists in Europe, but all the while he was searching for something to call his own. It was at Le Croix du Sud that Django first heard Stephane Grappelli play the fiddle, and after a couple of return visits, Django approached Grappelli with an idea. He wanted a talented jazz violinist to play in his “little orchestra”--a jazz ensemble with “no drums, no trumpets”. That idea didn’t really catch on with Grappelli at first, but the two kept in close contact over the next few months. It wasn’t until Grappelli ventured out to Django's caravan in Porte de Choisy that Grappelli and Django really played together. This is seen as the turning point in

both of their careers because this is the moment that they both realized that they were perfect for each other musically.

Both men were hired by Louis Vola to play in a genteel tea-dance band that performed frequently. During the bands breaks, Django and Grappelli would continue playing for their own benefit behind the stage. Both men found this more enjoyable than sitting around doing nothing, and they began to experiment with different music and arrangements. After a while, some of the other musicians began to notice their little habit and joined in. With Vola on bass—plus Roger Chaput and Joseph Reinhardt on guitar—the quintet began to rehearse regularly and started to gain notice from other musicians and producers, such as Pierre Nourry and Charles Delaunay who liked what the quintet was doing and asked if they would be willing to record some of their more polished tunes. At first there were some reservations within the group, but after some discussion, they decided to try and pitch the idea to a few record labels. The first liked the idea, but later rejected it after hearing the quintet play, calling it "too modern"; however, the second, Ultraphone, liked them and decided to record a four-song album which they did in December of 1934. This first album included "Dinah," "Tiger Rag," "Lady be Good," and "I Saw Stars." The album was not an instant hit, and some people of that era did view it as too modern, but the album did help solidify the gypsy jazz ensemble as three guitars, a violin, and a stand-up bass, and the beginning of the original Quintette du Hot Club de France.

### **[Slide of the Group]**

The next piece we will play for you tonight is titled "Djangology." It is a tune written by Django and Grappelli for their 1949 album by the same name. **4:00**

### **[Black Slide]**

### **[Djangology]**

### **The Selmer Guitar:**

As you have probably noticed by now, the guitars that we are using do not look like typical steel

string-guitars, and this is because they are not. The gypsy guitar has a history of its own and plays a crucial part in the development of the traditional gypsy jazz sound. It isn't very often in music that a musician is linked almost exclusively to one instrument, let alone one guitar. As I stated earlier, Django began his musical career on a banjo-guitar, but was later given a more standard version by his cousins during his rehabilitation. This instrument is now synonymous with gypsy jazz, and almost all gypsy jazz musicians can be seen playing this style of guitar. The original design of this guitar dates back to 1931 and was first drawn up by musician, Mario Maccaferri, who had an idea for a more resonant classical guitar that was to be played in larger concert halls and arenas. The idea was to create an instrument that was dynamically louder, but that still kept the tone of a classical guitar. He took his design to the highly-acclaimed instrument company in Paris, France, Selmer. This particular company is mostly associated with woodwind and brass instruments, but Selmer saw the potential for a new market. This allowed Maccaferri to set up a workshop in the Paris factory to start manufacturing Selmer guitars for the first time. During the first year of production, Selmer released five types of guitars: three gut-string models and two steel-string models. The two steel-string models were known as "The Orchestra" and "The Hawaiian". Included in Maccaferri's original blueprints was a design of an internal sound box: this feature was one of the defining characteristics of the majority of Selmer guitars under Maccaferri. Both the Orchestra and the Hawaiian were fitted with this internal sound box, but the Orchestra would find itself more suited for the gypsy style, as Django would find out. While creating the Orchestra model, Maccaferri drew from other musical instruments to create this new concept of what a guitar could be.

### **[Slide of Orchestra Model]**

It had a wider body like a dreadnought guitar, a floating bridge and metal tail piece like a mandolin, and a wide neck like a classical. He also added some new features that hadn't been used by luthiers before, such as a flat heel at the base of the neck and a cutaway for better access to the higher register

of the neck, an extend fretboard over the sound hole to give the instrument a total of 24 frets, the slotted trapezoid headstock, and the signature D-shaped sound hole that was needed to accommodate the internal sound box. This guitar was one of the first that Django began to play after his injury, and many pictures of Django playing this guitar can be seen today.

### **[Black Slide]**

Maccaferri only worked with Selmer for two years before deciding to leave the company for a new business venture in 1933. The problem was, he had the patent rights for the internal sound box and Selmer couldn't legally sell the guitars without his permission. Over the next two years, the Selmer Orchestra model would go through many changes, until 1936, when they decided to remove the sound box entirely and also replace the D-shaped sound hole with a small oval shape instead, because the larger D-shape that accommodated the sound box was no longer needed. They also got rid of the fretboard extension, cutting the fret count from 24 down to 21, and rounded off the fretboard around the oval sound hole.

### **[Slide of Modèle Jazz]**

This new guitar would be known as the *Modèle Jazz* and would be the standard of construction until Selmer decided to stop making guitars in 1952.

Throughout Django's career, Selmer began to take notice of his free advertising of their guitars and encouraged Django to come by their Paris store any time to equip all of their group with any guitars they needed. Many of the instruments Django took from Selmer were gifted away to family and friends until he came across serial number 503 in 1940. This *Modèle Jazz* became his favorite and was played by Django until his death and was later donated to a museum.

### **[Slide of Orchestra Model and the Modèle Jazz]**

During Selmer's 20-year construction of guitars, they only produced less than 1,000 total. This small number has made original Selmer guitars very rare and extremely pricey. Even though

Maccaferri's design helped Django create his signature sound, the two men never met in person. Today, thousands of replica *Modèle Jazz* guitars are made all over the world, and with the rising fame of Django's music, they are becoming more and more expensive. Some of the more accomplished luthiers in the industry can sell *Modèle Jazz* and Orchestra style guitars for upwards of \$15,000.

### **[Black Slide]**

One of the main reasons that this guitar stands out in gypsy jazz is its timbre or tone color. The booming bass of the low strings and tight snap of the high strings and register are accentuated by this guitar and its original design. Just like with the ensemble itself, the guitars chosen to lead the ensemble were very specific for the Hot Club sound. **5:40**

### **[Django's Tiger]**

#### **Django's improvisational style:**

Now that we have listened to a few gypsy jazz tunes, let's examine what made Django stand out-- not only as an innovator of gypsy jazz-- but also as an improviser. Django was one of the most expressive improvisors of his time. He taught himself how to play by ear, and also copied other guitar players and mimicked their solos in order to reproduce that specific sound. Through all this, Django developed an extremely original soloing style that has become standard in the gypsy jazz we hear today. This ability to play such creative solos in a song or tune is important because in any style of jazz, improvisation gives each tune its individuality. Of course, each tune that we have played so far, however different, still follows the same pattern in regard to form. We always start out each tune by playing the main melody, or the head, over the given chords for that specific piece. Then we each take turns improvising over the given chords until we return back to the head and end the tune. This structure repeats in almost all tunes played in the gypsy jazz style. What makes each piece different and exciting is the spontaneity of the performers through their solos. That being said, whenever you hear a

melodic phrase, it may sound different than the last time you heard it, making the music even more enjoyable to listen to.

Django's technique includes many different musical characteristics, such as glissandi, tremolo picking, melodic chromaticism, octaves, and most importantly, arpeggios. All of these musical techniques have been implemented into our solos tonight. For example, a glissando,

### **[Glissando Demo/ Slide]**

consists of a note or group of notes sliding up and down the neck to and from a specific pitch. Django would use this technique to move around the neck or just change his solo patterns in general for a fresh outlook or to begin the start of a new phrase. Django would also use tremolo picking,

### **[Tremelo Picking Demo/ Slide]**

for quick or rapid soloing, either on a single pitch or a group of pitches. The tremolo picking technique mimics the glissando in regard to its motion, but it also draws upon a specific technique most commonly used by mandolin players in which the performer rapidly picks the given pitches throughout the entire glissando.

Another technique that Django implemented throughout his soloing was the use of chromaticism and its function in the melody of the solo . A typical melodic line consists of a sequence of half steps and whole steps. However, a chromatic line moves in subsequent half steps, either upward or downward to a desired pitch.

### **[Chromatic Line Demo/ Slide]**

These chromatic runs allow the performer to move through chord changes in a more exciting and musically colorful way. If used properly, just as Django used them in many of his solos, a chromatic run can give the listener a sense of tension or instability quickly followed by a sense of resolve or stability.

Another common technique Django frequently used is the slightly more complicated octave.

## **[Octave Demo]**

This technique requires more skill to accomplish effectively because some strings need to sound, while others need to be muted. There are two types of octaves that Django would use, including the one-string gap octave,

## **[One-String Gap Octave Demo/ Slide]**

and the two-string gap octave.

## **[Two-String Gap Octave Demo/ Slide]**

Both of these shapes require the outside pitches to sound while the inside pitch or pitches are to be muted with the left hand. The two sounding pitches should also be played with a sharp down stroke resulting in a quick snap of the strings. When performed correctly, these octaves add depth and a specific timbre that is unique to gypsy jazz.

Finally, the most important aspect of any gypsy solo is the use of arpeggios. An arpeggio is a chord that is played one note at a time, instead of all together, like this.

## **[Arpeggio Demo/ Slide]**

The arpeggio highlights the notes of a given chord, and while used during a solo, highlights the given chords of that specific tune. Because of Django's disability, it was much harder for him to play linear melodic lines or melodies that follow a specific scale. Therefore, Django would use arpeggios to move through the chords, giving each of his solos a very expressive quality. The arpeggio can be seen as the basis for all of Django's solos and also the main building block for all improvisation in gypsy jazz.

## **[Black Slide]**

These are only some of the musical techniques that Django used while improvising; however, like all jazz musicians, his style expanded and changed throughout his musical career, taking from other styles of jazz and other musicians. He was known to take from swing, latin, and even be-bop jazz towards the end of his career, creating one of the most unique improvisational skill sets in jazz history.

The next gypsy tune that we will play for you tonight is titled “Blues en Mineur,” or “Minor Blues.” This piece will help illustrate the musical techniques I have just mentioned and also show you the slower and softer side of gypsy jazz. **5:40**

## **[Minor Blues]**

### **The future of Gypsy Jazz:**

Toward the end of Django's career, he began to slow down and eventually stopped booking massive tours and large concerts. At one point, it seemed that he had lost interest in music altogether. In some ways, he felt as though he was trapped in the style he helped create, and in other ways he felt a constant need to push beyond his vast accomplishments into new styles, genres, and musical undertakings. He had made such a profound name for himself in gypsy jazz that it was hard for others to view him as anything other than an accomplished gypsy jazz musician. For example, after years of composing small works for his group, Django began to dabble in larger compositions for orchestra and big band; however, because of his musical illiteracy, he needed the help of other musicians to complete his scores, requiring long periods of time to complete just one piece. Also, the music that Django did manage to finish was viewed, by some as being too modern, and nobody stepped forward to perform these works. This tepid response to his artistic offerings led to Django's eventual disinterest in music altogether and is also what prompted him to put away his guitar, seemingly for good; fortunately for us, his legacy was not so quick to throw in the towel.

Over the past few decades, the music of Django has made a dramatic comeback. Guitarists and groups have popped up all over the world, and gypsy jazz music is starting to receive more mainstream attention for the first time since its creation in the 30's and 40's. As mentioned before, music for Django was a family affair, and a lot of the musicians that played with Django on a regular basis were related to him in one way or another. Some of the more recognizable family names associated with gypsy jazz were Lagrene, Winterstein, Lafertin and Rosenberg. The wide array of musicians that played with

Django made a conscious effort to pass on his playing style to future family members. The decades following produced some of the most talented and expressive gypsy jazz players since Django himself, and most of them, like Birelli Lagrene, Jimmy Rosenberg, and Fapy Lafertin, were direct descendents of those original families and were lucky enough to learn gypsy jazz by the hands of those who knew it best. Other musicians such as Angelo Debarre, Joscho Stephan, John Jorgenson, Dan Hicks, and Gonzalo Bergara were either self taught just like Django, or learned from other gypsy jazz musicians, but have long since made a name for themselves in jazz culture. Also, gypsy jazz branched away from just European countries into Russia, North and South America and even Australia, inspiring countless musicians to carry the legacy of Django.

As with most music, it didn't take long for gypsy jazz to evolve and change over the years. Gypsy musicians began to see the potential to expand on Django's work, and began to incorporate more modern playing techniques. Certain bands such as the French Les Doigts de l'Homme,

**[Slide of Les Doigts de l'Homme]**

continue playing in the gypsy jazz style, but with with a creative twist. Groups like Les Doigts constantly push the boundaries of what gypsy jazz is and continue to move slowly into what it could be. These new innovative groups add another level of excitement to the ever developing style of gypsy jazz.

**[Black Slide]**

Lastly, alongside the growing popularity of any style of music comes festivals, and gypsy jazz is no exception.

**[Slide of Festival]**

One of the most famous is held in Django's beloved town of Samois-sur-Seine, which each year plays host to thousands of Django enthusiasts along with the most prominent gypsy jazz musicians of today.

**[Black Slide]**

These musicians and festivals have helped keep the music of Django alive through the past few decades, but they are also doing much more than that. In retrospect, the music of Django and gypsy jazz is relatively young, and because of this, it is even more important that we keep it alive and strong. The musical contribution of Django Reinhardt can not be overlooked, especially in today's society. The music that we are playing for you today mimics Django in more ways than one. We play this music because we enjoy it, we like how it makes us feel and how it challenges us as musicians. Also, we play this music to help pave the way for future gypsy jazz musicians because we feel that this is music worth learning and worth keeping around.

After the urging of friends and family, Django decided to record one more album and perform local gigs around his home in Samois-sur-Seine. It was there that Django began to find stability in his life with his wife and son, while pursuing other hobbies, such as painting and fishing; however, this sense of ease would be short-lived. Unfortunately for us, on Saturday, May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1953, Django Reinhardt was taken before his time. While sipping coffee at a local cafe, Django collapsed where he sat. He was rushed to a hospital, where doctors were unsuccessful in reviving him. Sadly, he passed away hours later at the age of 43.

As with any death, it can be hard to see the silver lining. Django Reinhardt's death, in particular, was not only a tragedy for his friends and family, but also for the jazz community in many countries. It is not often that one solitary musician can have such an impact on music, and therefore it is not surprising that the music of Django lives on to this day. **6:00**

**[Sheik of Araby]**

**[Encore: J' Attendrai]**