



## **Gypsy Jazz 101**

### **Study Guide for Middle School and High School Students**

#### **The History of Gypsy Jazz**

Gypsies are nomads who wander all across the countries of the world, taking their homes with them. They have always been on the move, ever since they left Egypt and India. No one is certain of where they came from, but many gypsies were originally from either Egypt or India. They seem to be everywhere, yet they are often hard to find because they're shy, private people who keep to themselves. They even have their own languages. Some gypsies are extremely musical; they can hear a tune one time and immediately they can sing it or play it. It's very natural for these musical gypsies to play an instrument when they are very young; playing music to them is as easy as talking. They play with their fathers, mothers, uncles & aunts; everyone plays together. One of the reasons that gypsies are always moving around from village to village is so that they can see their relatives and that usually means a big party with food, dancing and MUSIC.

In the 1930s, the gypsies in Europe began to play the jazz music that was invented in America. They heard records and radio broadcasts. Before jazz the gypsies played all kinds of music, and now they found that jazz was extremely popular with dancers and they could make a lot of money playing jazz!

In America, jazz is played on mostly loud instruments like drums, trumpet, saxophone, tuba, piano, etc., but because gypsies take their homes with them wherever they go gypsies prefer portable instruments such as guitars and violins. Since they didn't have drums, they learned how to play the guitar so that it sounded like a drum! They also learned how to make the guitar sing like a trumpet or a saxophone, almost like magic. To this day, people are still learning how to do this from gypsies!

Django Reinhardt, a very gifted musician even when he was a child, invented a style of jazz called Gypsy Jazz (in Europe they call it Jazz Manouche. Manouche is the name of the tribe of gypsy that plays music). He was a virtuoso musician, which means he was considered the best. No one could believe how great he was, especially when he was a little boy. They'd never seen anyone so good at playing all the instruments; he made it seem so easy.

Django, like most gypsies, was illiterate; he never went to school and could not read or write. He could not even spell his own name but he could play Gypsy Jazz better than almost anyone else.

He created Gypsy Jazz by combining four different styles of music:

- 1) Classical music (like Bach, Beethoven, etc)
- 2) Gypsy music (like Hungarian rhapsody by Liszt, Czardas de Monti, etc)
- 3) Dance music from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century- polkas, tangos, waltzes, etc.
- 4) American jazz- which was new to Europe in the 1920s & 30s.

By playing this music on stringed instruments he invented something new and unique – and was the first true jazz musician in Europe.

## Discussion Questions

### **What is Jazz?**

~ Music that is improvised for listening and/or dancing. Jazz is usually played on brass or woodwind instruments, drums, piano, and amplified guitars, etc.

### **What is Gypsy Jazz?**

~ Gypsy jazz is music that is played by the Manouche (and others, Sinti, Roma, etc) gypsies of Europe. It was created by Django Reinhardt in the 1930s with his partner- violinist Stephane Grappelli who together created the Quintette du Hot Club de France. The Quintette devised an acoustic instrumentation that has become the template for gypsy jazz bands: string bass, violin, solo guitar and one or two rhythm guitars.



**Django Reinhardt**

### **How is Gypsy Jazz different than other jazz?**

~ Gypsy jazz is different from other jazz in two aspects. First, it is usually played exclusively on stringed instruments and it is also the instruments are usually exclusively acoustic. The rhythm guitars are played in a distinctly percussive way so as to replicate the sound of a brush on a snare drum. Waltzes are very common, usually at brisk tempos. Gypsy jazz is also characterized as a predominately 'swing' oriented kind of jazz which is less common than most other kinds of jazz.

### **What is SWING?**

~ Certainly a matter of personal taste and highly subjective, but generally swing is a quality of rhythmic lightness, bounce, or insistence that can compel the listener to tap their foot (or even to get up and dance!)

### **Who are GYPSYS?**

~ Gypsies are nomadic people who take their homes with them, wherever they go. Gypsies are homeless by choice and are often misunderstood and not trusted by society. Gypsies can be found in most countries, though it is unclear where they originated from- either Egypt or India.

### **What is the history of gypsy jazz?**

~ Django Reinhardt was a gypsy child prodigy/virtuoso born in a wagon in 1910. He played all the stringed instruments and was quite famous by the time he was 10. Gypsies can play anything they hear; even if they only hear it once. Because he was a true musical genius he was able to play all kinds of music. By combining gypsy music, classical music, dance music (waltzes, tangos, polkas, etc) and the brand new (then, in the 1930s) jazz music from America he created the genre of gypsy jazz. In Europe this is called Jazz Manouche. Manouche is the name of the tribe of gypsies to which Django belonged. Currently more and more people all over the planet are playing Gypsy jazz.

### **Did WWII have an effect on gypsy jazz?**

~Certainly! The gypsies, along with Jews & Homosexuals, were being imprisoned and killed in the Nazi concentration camps. When the war broke out, the Hot Club de France happened to be in London and Django, in spite of being a declared 'nomad', he was returning to his homeland to be there 'come what may'. Stephane

Grappelli thought this was insanity and remained in London throughout the war and made a name for himself without Django and the Hot Club. In fact, he met a then-unknown blind pianist named George Shearing with whom he found a new partner and foil for his jazz exploits.

In spite of the Nazi determination to wipe out the gypsies, Django somehow not only survived but was asked to play for the SS. Legend has it that there was a high-ranking SS officer who provided Django with 2 bodyguards while he was touring in Germany. In turn, Django refused to play for them; until they paid him exorbitant amounts of money for his appearances!

### **How did the gypsies learn jazz?**

~ Django Reinhardt heard records from the US and immediately understood what was being played by the musicians; Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Coleman Hawkins, etc. Because jazz was brand new in the 1930s and quite popular, Django became a national hero in France because he was the first Frenchman to be a true jazz musician.

By the mid-1930s, when the recordings of the Hot Club de France were reaching the U.S., the same musicians that inspired Django came to France to play with him!

The gypsies have always improvised music so learning jazz was a natural thing for them to do. Many gypsies and non-gypsies (called GADJOs) learn by listening to recordings of Django and other gypsies.

### **What is improvising or improvisation?**

~ Improvisation is when the musician is playing something that he is inventing on the spot, in the moment, extemporaneously. First you play a song, then you paraphrase the melody again; playing it with subtle or slight changes but keeping the melody intact and recognizable. An alternative approach is to play the song once through so the listener knows how the song goes and then launch into an original melody that is made to fit the harmony or chords of the melody that was first stated. Often the melody will be repeated at the end of the improvisation to establish a comfort zone for the listener so they can enjoy the ending of the piece in complicity with the musicians.

### **How do you improvise?**

~ There are many ways to learn improvisation; you can play the melody with variations; you can re-invent your own melody to fit the chord changes; you can play something that sounds good at the same time as the melody; or you can play something that is less connected to the harmonic structure (the chord changes) of the tune and is simply rhythmically while compelling. Some musicians like to keep the listener 'with them' as they invent, others prefer to play in a manner that can seem to be asking the listener to "hold on tight: it's going to be bumpy and difficult to follow!"

In order to improvise, you must be very comfortable and confident in playing your instrument; it's not about faking anything. A solid understanding of harmony and melody is essentially.

### **How does Math fit into music?**

~ Music is heard through the ears, but it affects the body! Usually we hear music and we want to tap our feet. All music can be counted- usually 'one-two, one-two' or 'one-two-three-four, one-two-three-four', etc. Those are the beats. The beats get collected into sentences, like words, but in music they're called phrases. These phrases are usually built by measures that contain four beats per measure (if the music is in 4/4 time. 3/4 time is three beats per measure, etc.)

Chords are notes that are piled up together like little structures: the bottom note is usually the root or I. The next note of a chord is usually the III or third, which means its 3 scale steps away from the first note. The next note of a chord is usually the V or fifth, the fifth note away from the first or root note. Scales are made up of 8 notes, etc.

The harmony can also be explained mathematically; the key of a song is the I and each chord of a song is usually based on a different degree of the scale. Since there are only 8 notes in a scale with 4 (the flats) notes in-between (A, Bb, B, C, Db, D, Eb, E, F, Gb, G, Ab) there are only 12 notes and 12 chords to know. It's really very simple!

### **Why is Jazz an art form?**

~ The history of jazz follows the history of recording because without recordings we'd never know about performances that were played spontaneously. Classical music, because it's written down, can be replicated time and time again. When something is improvised it is played that way at that time only, then it's gone-

unless it's recorded. In the late 1920s' the virtuoso trumpeter Louis Armstrong realized that improvisations, while fun to play, were being recorded and that those recordings would be heard by many people for many years to come. He wanted to do something that would be so good it would make the listener want to hear it again and again, much the way a composer would craft a melody that would stand the test of time. He applied his brain, his imagination and his un-paralleled command of the instrument to create solos that while improvised, were true compositions in their own right, nearly worthy of publishing! This changed jazz from being merely a fun kind of music that was played and forgotten into an art form that has grown and changed according to the tastes of musicians and listeners for over 100 years.

### **What makes gypsy jazz guitar sound so different from other kinds of guitar playing?**

**~ There are three main distinctions to understand:**

- 1) The guitar that is usually played in this genre is a Selmer style guitar. Selmer was the saxophone company in Paris in the 1930s. Mario Maccaferri designed a guitar and persuaded the Selmer Company to manufacture and sell them. The guitar is similar to a classical but it has steel strings. The sound is brighter, clearer and louder than most other guitars, but because only 1000 were made (between 1934 and 1954) they were very uncommon until the last 10 years (when there has been a huge demand for replicas).
- 2) The right hand is very different in the way that it strikes the strings when compared to American guitar playing; the wrist is bent at 45-degree angle and is completely loose and relaxed.
- 3) Because Django had a handicapped left hand (his 3<sup>rd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> fingers were burned and paralyzed in a fire when he was 18) he played with only the first and second fingers. This approach to the guitar is radically different and must be understood (if not imitated) in order to play in the genre.



**Selmer Guitar      Typical Guitar**

### **How could Django Reinhardt play with only two fingers?!**

~Django Reinhardt loved a challenge! His musical understanding was so deep that he had to find a way to express himself. Additionally, he simply made the best of a bad situation, and came up with something unique. A very high degree of accuracy and velocity is required when playing with 2 fingers, qualities that are inherent in the music still.

## **Gypsy Jazz 101 Study Guide for Elementary School Students**

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everyone plays together. One of the reasons that gypsies are always moving around from village to village is so that they can see their relatives and that usually means a big party with food, dancing and MUSIC.

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### Vocabulary

**Gypsy:** One who is homeless by choice. Living in a wagon or a vehicle of some sort, they take their homes with them wherever they go.

**Virtuoso:** A person with superior musical abilities. Someone who is able to do almost anything with a musical instrument.

**Jazz:** Music that is usually improvised on the spot and is usually never played the same way twice. Jazz is played sometimes for dancing, always for listening. Invented in America in the early 1900's, popularized by such famous people as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, etc.

**Improvisation:** Music played without reading music, it is made up on the spot by the players. The musician plays whatever their imagination can dream up.

**Egypt:** Part of North Africa

**India:** Part of Central Asia

**Nomad:** Wanderer, gypsy.



**Manouche:** A type of gypsy from Europe, usually very highly musical. Most gypsies are Romany gypsies, Manouche (and Sinti) are a type of Romany gypsy.

**Rhythm;** The pulse, the beat of music. Usually played 4/4 (you can count four beats to each measure and then repeat) or  $\frac{3}{4}$  (which you can waltz to) (demonstrate)

**Melody:** The theme of a piece of music, usually the part you can sing along with.

**Django Reinhardt:** Manouche gypsy guitarist- as a child he played all the string instruments. With his partner, violinist Stephane Grappelli, created the Quintette of the Hot Club de France in 1934 a jazz group with string bass, two rhythm guitars and violin.



**Django Reinhardt**

**Questions for post-performance:**

Did you feel that the musicians were having fun?

Were you able to hear each instrument- how is each instrument different from the others?

Do all the instruments work the same way?

Did the instruments all look the same?

Did the instruments all sound the same?

Which instrument would you want to play?

Could you tell who was playing the rhythm and who was playing a solo?

What did you enjoy most about the show?

Can you trace the path of the gypsies across Europe to France?