



## Django: The Life and Music of a Gypsy Legend

By Michael Dregni

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Django Reinhardt was arguably the greatest guitarist who ever lived, an important influence on Les Paul, Charlie Christian, B.B. King, Jerry Garcia, Chet Atkins, and many others. Yet there is no major biography of Reinhardt.

Now, in *Django*, Michael Dregni offers a definitive portrait of this great guitarist. Handsome, charismatic, childlike, and unpredictable, Reinhardt was a character out of a picaresque novel. Born in a gypsy caravan at a crossroads in Belgium, he was almost killed in a freak fire that burned half of his body and left his left hand twisted into a claw. But with this maimed left hand flying over the frets and his right hand plucking at dizzying speed, Django became Europe's most famous jazz musician, commanding exorbitant fees--and spending the money as fast as he made it. Dregni not only chronicles this remarkably colorful life--including a fascinating account of gypsy culture--but he also sheds much light on Django's musicianship. He examines his long musical partnership with violinist Stéphane Grappelli--the one suave and smooth, the other sharper and more dissonant--and he traces the evolution of their novel string jazz ensemble, *Quintette du Hot Club de France*. Indeed, the author spotlights Django's amazing musical diversity, describing his swing-styled Nouveau Quintette, his big band Django's Music, and his later bebop ensemble, as well as his many compositions, including symphonic pieces influenced by Ravel and Debussy and his unfinished organ mass inspired by Bach. And along the way, the author offers vivid snapshots of the jazz scene in Paris--colorful portraits of Josephine Baker, Bricktop, Louis Armstrong, Coleman Hawkins, and countless others--and of Django's vagabond wanderings around France, Europe, and the United States, where he toured with Duke Ellington.

Capturing the extraordinary life and times of one of the great musicians of the twentieth century, *Django* is a must-read portrait of a true original.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In this carefully researched biography, rich with details from interviews with family members, friends and musicians, Dregni, a writer for *Vintage Guitar* magazine, brings legendary Gypsy jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt (1910–1953) into the spotlight. Born in a Belgian caravan, Django began performing in Parisian dance halls at 12. In 1928, after a fire turned his left hand into a clawed hook, he learned to work the frets with just two fully mobile fingers, creating new chord forms and playing with stunning dexterity. With his brother and three other musicians—including celebrated violinist Stéphane Grappelli (staid, suave, classically trained, Stéphane was in many ways Django's opposite)—he formed a string jazz ensemble, Quintette du Hot Club de France, which started informally in 1934 and was, by 1937, nearly "falling apart under the strain of [its] own genius." But they kept playing, and their fame spread. Spared by the Nazis because a German *kommandant* liked his playing, Django became a national hero when one of his compositions, "Nuages," became the unofficial anthem of occupied France. Dregni casts Django as a mercurial, charismatic Romany innocent, alternately transfixed by *gadjo* life and dismissive of it. Colorful descriptions of the nightclubs of jazz-age Paris and sensitive appraisals of Django's musicianship add to the book's appeal.

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From [Booklist](#)

Jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt (1910-53) is the most famous Gypsy of all time. That he was very much a Gypsy--uncomfortable living in a building or one place for long, prone to blowing off engagements when he had enough money or something more interesting came up, infuriatingly proud and insouciant, reckless and hedonistic--is his most delightful aspect as a biographical subject, for from it springs a wealth of hilarious, outrageous, and touching stories. His career began during the rise of the *bals musette* style of French popular dance music; flared with unparalleled brilliance in the never-quite-formal Quintette du Hot Club de France, in which he and violinist Stephane Grappelli spurred one another to become the first European peers of Louis Armstrong; and peaked, paradoxically, in wartime Paris. Dregni couches Django's story in sketches of the musical styles and persons that crucially affected him, and vice versa, so that, despite anachronistic solecisms (e.g., "gothic sentimentality," "medieval guillotines") and grammatical gaffes, this biography is a splendid history of early European, especially French, jazz. *Ray Olson*

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Review

"One of the most satisfying jazz biographies in recent years.... Dregni writes lyrically of a place where the crosscurrents of art, music and fashion collided to produce a cultural richness that happens only once or twice a century, if humans are lucky.... Rich and rewarding."--*Baltimore Sun*

"In many ways the book jazz enthusiasts have been waiting for.... Fascinating and well-written. Dregni's musical analysis will send fans running to the stereo, digging out the old recordings and listening with fresh ears. Guitarists will have a feast reading about Django's technique and his famous Selmer Maccaferri guitar. Although Django will always be a larger-than-life figure, Dregni has given us a much clearer picture of the man behind the myth. 'Django' is, for now, the definitive biography, and we are in Dregni's debt for considerably advancing our understanding of the remarkable Django Reinhardt, his music and the world he

lived in."--David French, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

"Extremely informative.... An important appreciation of an oft-forgotten musician.... Dregni carefully dissects Reinhardt's virtuoso playing style without resorting to technical jargon, and he spends plenty of time tending to Reinhardt's passionate soul--artistic, gypsy and otherwise."--Mitch Myers, *DownBeat*

"A compelling portrait of this colorful musician, one that gives equal time to Reinhardt's fascinating story as well as ample musical analysis."--*JazzTimes*

"Dregni's biography does his complex subject justice.... His immersion in the period's history enriches his storytelling and our understanding. The panoramic results present Django Reinhardt as he has never been seen.... Dregni clarifies a lot of history while weaving an illuminated web of contexts around his subject. He vividly describes Gypsy life and mores, and anti-Gypsy bigotry; uncovers new aspects of Reinhardt's life and work; discusses Parisian musette, American 'hot' jazz and bebop, and classical music; and insightfully details the music Reinhardt made and the instruments and people he made it with."--Gene Santoro, *The New York Times Book Review*

"There was only one Django Reinhardt, and Dregni supplies a vivid, detailed portrait of the man behind the guitar.... Dregni has given us Reinhardt the man--rascal, scoundrel, transcendent improviser, failed human being."--Joel Selvin, *San Francisco Chronicle*

"An encyclopedic account of the Gypsy jazzman's life and times that provides an abundance of new information, finds new connections between what was already known, and clears up many misconceptions along the way."--*Guitar Player*

"A rags-to-riches story of a unique talent whose works continue to touch aspiring guitarists of all genres."--*Library Journal* (starred review)

"The great strength of his book is his tireless research into the world of Django's gypsy roots. He has tracked down and interviewed as many of Reinhardt's relatives as he can find, as well as older gypsies who knew and worked with him. The result is a more complete portrait of Reinhardt's inner life, including his relationships with his parents, his wife and many other women, and two sons. There is even a detailed account of the tragic fire that cost him two fingers.... *Django* is a remarkable book, and its outsider's perspective is part of the reason."--*New York Sun*

"The book is alive from beginning to end, and after awhile you feel like you were there as Django's career

unfolds. Dregni insures that the story behind the music will not fade. Musicians, guitarists, students of the history of WWII, and those who love a good biography will love this book."--Frank Forte, *Just Jazz Guitar*

"Dregni...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."--Adam Gopnik, *The New Yorker*

"Recently I roamed the streets of Paris carrying 'Django: The Life and Music of a Gypsy Legend,' a new biography by Michael Dregni. It was my guidebook to a city the great musician knew like the neck of his guitar, from the seedy, smoke-filled dives of Pigalle to the fancy, cafe-society quarter around the Etoile... With a little imagination, Django cultists can still feel his presence in the City of Light."--Susan Spano, *Los Angeles Times*

"In this carefully researched biography, rich with details from interviews with family members, friends and musicians, Dregni brings legendary Gypsy jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt into the spotlight.... Dregni casts Django as a mercurial, charismatic Romany innocent, alternately transfixed by dago life and dismissive of it. Colorful descriptions of the nightclubs of jazz-age Paris and sensitive appraisals of Django's musicianship add to the book's appeal."--*Publishers Weekly*

"Uncovers the influences that helped fuse Reinhardt's unique talent and background with a developing music scene that would eventually become a lasting art form."--*Vintage Guitar Magazine*

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