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Django: The Life And Music Of A Gypsy Legend



Synopsis

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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Customer Reviews

Django wasn't just a fabulous guitarist, he was a force of nature. People rave over his guitar work after the fire that destroyed half his hand, but no one, it seems, wants to say how unbelievable he would have been without his deformed digits. I love Django and his music, and I love this book. There's a lot of poignancy in his runaway train lifestyle and the music that was denied to us

I have long admired the music of Django Reinhardt, but I didn't know much about him until I read Michael Dregni's fantastic book. The author not only told the fascinating story of an incredible musician, but provided a wealth of information about the people in Django's life, such as his famous musical partner, Stephane Grappelli, as well as important figures in the jazz scene in France, like Charles Delauney. Django was quite a character, who spent money as fast as it came in, bought expensive cars and abandoned them by the side of the road when they broke down. World War II was also a very interesting time for Django. Jazz music was viewed as subversive by the Nazis, but was allowed to be played in certain circumstances. The gypsies were also hunted by the Nazis, but because Django was such a famous jazz musician, he was virtually left alone. While the book was very fun and engaging, there were times that I felt like the author spent a lot of time giving background information to set up events in Django's life. And while this information was helpful, it sometimes felt like I was reading a biography about someone else. It all came together, though, and gave a very detailed account of Django's life that made me excited about the man and his music. As I read the book, I was so excited that I kept going into the iTunes store to listen to the music as it was mentioned by the author. I think I'll go buy a gypsy guitar now and start swinging!

A great book--very well written. My only quibble: why mention of Django and Piaf?

A very detailed account of a very amazing guitarist, and well versed in music writing as well

I approached this book with the intention of learning more about the mysterious Gypsy guitarist who could play phenomenally with only two useful fingers and his thumb on his fretting hand. Instead, what I got was a very detailed, well-written account of Django Reinhardt the man and his part in the nascent French jazz scene, all nicely put in historical context of Europe during WWII. Fans and historians of jazz are in for a real treat with this book. I had no idea of Django's relation to and influence by Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong, among others. Musical geniuses of this magnitude are often eccentric, and the author does a more than thorough job of pointing that fact out about Reinhardt. However, despite his phenomenal life and story, I admit that some of the very childish, self-centered, egotistical aspects of Reinhardt's personality made it very difficult to relate to or have sympathy for the man. Still, all in all, this book is an interesting read. It isn't at all the kind of book that's going to make guitarists run out and practice, but it should be enthralling for jazz aficionados and history buffs.

I love biographies that help challenge established mythologies about a person. In this case, the myth of Django's so called disastrous American tour. Turns out that was just hyperbole, with a little homesickness from Django. I also loved all the detail about the other figures in Parisian jazz.

This utterance comes halfway through Michael Dregni's book, and it's one of maybe 50 direct quotes by Django Reinhardt drizzled over 280 pages. Self-conscious about his lack of education, Reinhardt didn't like talking to "gadjÃ©." He is known to have written three letters in his life, and the most extended quote is bogus: an "interview" concocted by an impresario to defame a rival. It has to be quite a challenge for a biographer to work with so little material. And yet Dregni does an excellent job. While by necessity he has to rely on external testimony and events to make his portrayal, his focus is always on Reinhardt and the extraordinary contradictions of the man: one night dining with royalty, the next night stealing a chicken on a country road; living in a luxury hotel one week, a caravan the next; over-generosity alternating with infuriating pettiness; turning one gig into an all-night jam session, not bothering to show up for the next. You think you know Bohemian? This is Bohemian. Of course, Django was only verbally reticent. Musically, he is one of the most articulate, expressive players ever. So it's the musical parts of this book that really shine. Partly because of the nationalism of his promoters who wanted to push a French jazz musician, but mostly because of his magical talent (and in spite of a tendency to sleep later than recording session schedules), Reinhardt's output was vast and varied. As I imagine is true for many, I knew the Quintette/Grapelli

recordings to the exclusion of almost everything else. So I especially appreciated the discussions of his later career: the weird fact that during the Occupation, when jazz was officially verboten, he achieved his greatest popularity, and his enthusiasm for bebop, which I've always thought he anticipated with his angular, superfast playing. In the endnotes are many mentions of "interview with author, 2001/2/3..." Aside from the documentary research, Dregni deserves special gratitude for contacting people who knew Reinhardt and who will probably not be around much longer. His efforts have doubtless uncovered facts that, because of the large part of Reinhardt's life that exists only in the oral tradition, would certainly have been lost without them. Django Reinhardt, one of the more remarkable and mysterious characters of his time, deserves a first-rate biography. This is it.

Well written and well researched. Very interesting read about an enigma of a man. Includes lots of great info on specific recordings and background on Grapelli and others in the Hot Club of France and other groups he played with. Gives you a good insight into the Paris of the day as well as other places he was active. Some interesting background on gypsy life of the time as well.

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