

DJANGO

His is one of the most important names in the history of jazz. But without his dogged determination and will to succeed, the musical world would not be the same.

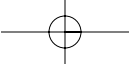
G YPSY CARAVAN

Jean Baptiste “Django” Reinhardt was a Roma (a Gypsy), born in 1910 in Belgium to a family of traveling musicians. Most of his childhood was spent in the Gypsy camps outside Paris, where he developed into a musical prodigy playing a six-string banjo tuned like a guitar.

In 1928 Django was an 18-year-old star on the rise, making a name for himself as a guitarist accompanying famous accordion players in the cafés and dance halls of Paris. Then tragedy struck: One night after a performance, Django’s caravan caught fire in a freak accident. He escaped, barely, but was severely burned. He nearly lost his right leg and was bedridden for over a year. But the real tragedy was that Django’s left hand—the one he used to play chords and solos on the fretboard—was permanently damaged.

STARTING OVER

The burns paralyzed Django’s pinky and ring fingers. It looked like his playing days were over. He was destitute, but knew in his heart that couldn’t give up on his lifelong dream. So even though he only had partial use of his index and middle fingers, Django began the long, painful process of relearning his instrument. Because he couldn’t spread the two fingers apart, playing chords was out of the question. So instead he concentrated on melody lines, and in doing so helped pioneer a brand new style of music: lead guitar.



Django's playing steadily improved until he was once again dazzling audiences (and musicians) with solos that were as smooth as they were fast. Just six years after the fire, Django was starring with violinist Stéphane Grappelli in the famous Quintet of the Hot Club of France. By this time he had mastered his new style—a style that five-fingered guitarists have struggled to imitate ever since.

THE MUSICIAN'S MUSICIAN

How influential was Django? All of the greatest musicians of the Jazz Age wanted to play with him: Louis Armstrong, Coleman Hawkins, and Duke Ellington, to name a few.

And his influence doesn't stop there. Every notable guitarist since has cited Django as an inspiration—from Charlie Christian and Les Paul to Eddie Van Halen, Carlos Santana, and even Willie Nelson. Chet Atkins called Reinhardt “the single greatest guitar player of the 20th century.”

Because Django refused to let a major setback derail him, he changed the face of popular music.

* * *

STOP AND SMELL THE LAUGHTER

“One day when I was little, and my parents were having a party, I went around to all the adults with a glass of water and said, ‘Drink this, it’s magic. It’ll make you taller.’ And they all drank it and said, ‘How cute.’ And then I snuck off into the room where they kept all the coats and hemmed everyone’s sleeves an inch shorter.”

—Steven Wright