

Transcript of 'Django Reinhardt and the Sound of Swing'

Intro: music: edit from "The man I love"

Narrator: The great jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt was born in France in 1910. The son of Gypsy parents, he grew up in a Manouche camp on the outskirts of Paris during the Great War. Django grew up in the world of the bohemian and the vagabond on the doorstep of a great city and it was here that he first learned the guitar.

After World War One, France in general and Paris in particular began to get back on its feet. In the bohemian atmosphere of the post war years, Paris was reborn as the City of Light, home to the greatest and most celebrated artists, painters, musicians, writers and poets of the day. This was where Django began his professional life. Though still in his teens, he was emerging as a guitarist of flawless technique and extraordinary speed, his blossoming as he played in the Pigalle and other artists' haunts on the Left Bank of the River Seine.

As the 'Roaring Twenties' gave way to the Thirties, Django listened to the modern sound of 'syncopated orchestras' like Billy Arnold's Novelty Jazz Band. He no doubt played the popular standards of the day, songs like 'The Sheikh' and 'Dinah', fusing this American style with his own spontaneous improvisation, in the traditional of gypsy music

Music: "See you in my dreams"

Narrator: The year 1928 was a turning point in Django Reinhardt's life. His left hand was horribly burned in a house fire. He remained partially paralysed for the rest of his life. His recovery from this disasterous injury was long and painful. Nevertheless Django set about overcoming his injury. Over the months that followed, he developed a unique instrumental technique, overcoming the loss of two of his fingers.

As his friend Charles Launey observed: "Django was gifted with such dexterity that partial disablement became a challenge which it was a point of pride to overcome."

Even before his accident, it seems that Django was already dissatisfied with playing melodies "straight" and was beginning to improvise on musical themes.

By 1931, back at work and his career moving apace, his return to the music scene coincided with his discovery of Jazz and his meeting with a violinist who was working in cabaret scene and as a cinema pianist for films - Stéphane Grapelli. Their musical collaboration created to a new sound, which flourished in the cafes of mid-Thirties Paris: the sound of Swing.

Music: "Christmas Swing"

Narrator: Jazz and Django were made for each other. As critic William Patrick wrote:

"It was in jazz that Django at last met the music which enabled him to be most himself and was the source of the delight which shines through all his improvisations."

The musical framework for Reinhardt and Grapelli was The Quintet of the Hot Club of France. Its basis was the "Manouche pump" - the regular pulse of the two rhythm guitars allied with the solid, bass-playing of Louis Vola. Sometimes dismissed as unrefined or laboured, this firm foundation became a distinctive feature of the genre.

The real function of the rhythm section was as a catalyst, a perfect background to Django's rich chromatic solos and Stéphane's inspired flights. The Manouche Pump provided the power. Django and Stéphane supplied the Swing.

Inventive, lyrical, even iconoclastic, the Quintet could always do justice to the works of the established Jazz greats such as Duke Ellington and Fats Waller or equally, transform the least of popular American hits, as in this 1937 recording of "Sweet Sue", with Coleman Hawkins on trumpet.

Music: "Sweet Sue"

Narrator: The soul of swing was relaxation. Nuages, or Clouds, represents a more lyrical and sensitive side of Django as a composer. As always, far ahead of his time, his solo in this piece begins with damped harmonics or overtones. With the poor quality of guitar strings in this period, and no electric amplification to speak of, no guitarist had even dreamt of using this difficult technique. Yet, Django executes this task smoothly and perfectly.

Music: "Nuages"

Narrator: Django Reinhardt died 50 year ago at the relatively young age of 43, but his legacy lives on in his music.

At the height of his skill and musical influence with the Hot Club, each composition magically evokes Paris before the war: a twilight time of intrigue, conflicting loyalties and uncertain sentiments. Reinhardt and Grapelli's music pervades a sense of place and style of Paris before German occupation, as well as exuding a powerful sense of excitement, of the pure pleasure of making music, combined with the freshness and drive which are the essence of the musician's art.