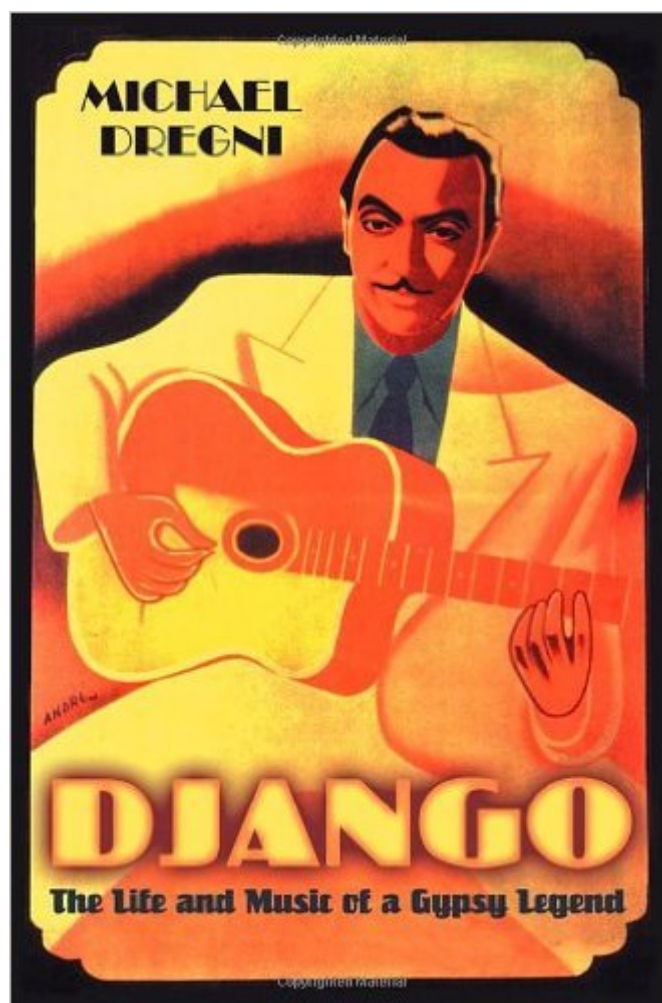


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Django: The Life And Music Of A Gypsy Legend



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

I'm always wary of books written about musicians by other musicians. I got this as a gift and expected a lot of worshipful prose about Django Reinhardt. Instead, I was delighted to find a very well-researched history which afforded Reinhardt the great respect he deserves as an innovative jazz musician, but doesn't patronize or idolize Django the person. What emerges is a good sense of Django as both a player and a man. This history of Gypsy jazz and the styles that influenced it have led me to new appreciation of recordings by players like Angelo DeBarre and even some of the Chopin Waltzes that were influenced by the musette tradition. There's a whole side to Gypsy music that is not as obvious or as well-known as Django's jazz influences. For anyone, especially a guitarist, interested in this kind of music, this book will make an excellent addition to your library. My only requests would be a list of sources for in-print recordings of some of the artists who were also mentioned in the book, like Baro Ferret who accompanied Django on many recordings but was apparently a virtuosic soloist himself, and perhaps a few more pictures beyond the small but fascinating selection included. Overall, this is a great piece of well-written research that will do a lot to encourage and preserve a very special musical tradition.

This is possibly one of the finest music biographies I've ever read (and I've read stacks). Instead of taking the tack of Django-worshipping, Dregni carefully and thoughtfully lays out all of the historical context around Django's life and music. This is a rarity among music biographies, which generally sum up historical context in literally just a few lines ("The Depression was over and times were tough, but the jukeboxes were still swingin'"). Dregni does a fabulous job, and makes it interesting to boot. He also doesn't cut Django too much slack, although he doesn't villainize him either. Genius is generally accompanied by a bit of madness, and always with a bit of narcissism, and Django had all of this, which doesn't make him a bad person, just a bit of a mad genius. Dregni did well expressing this. All in all, Django had a phenomenal life and his body of work is practically unmatched in any genre, as far as quality and prolificness. Dregni simply gave us a historical context and a background behind the man who made it. This book is recommended to jazz fans (whether gypsy jazz is your thing or not), musette fans, guitar players, Francophiles, those interested in gypsy culture, those interested in WWI and WWII, those interested in Paris in the '30s and '40s, history buffs, and so on.

In this book, Michael Dregni has done a wonderful job of putting the pieces together to tell the story of one of jazz history's most enigmatic, influential and inspired musicians. Usually, a critical look at a musician has to contend only with the prejudice and exaggeration of hearsay and legend, but in this book Dregni has also been confronted by the culture of shadows and secrets inhabited by the gypsies of Europe, no doubt making the process of connecting the dots of Django Reinhardt's story much more difficult. Gladly, he has done a marvelous job. The evocative prose succeeds in painting a picture not just of a life but of a time and place, equal parts romantic and real, that leaves the reader with an appreciation of what a truly remarkable man Django Reinhardt was and what a truly remarkable time it was in which he lived. Occasionally the book reminded me of a Jeunet film, an amber-hued voyage through a funhouse of dark corners, gypsy gangsters and cobblestones, all to the strains of an accordion heard through the rough doors of a bal-musette. Placed squarely in the middle of such a milieu, Django emerges as a complex genius, his flights of musical inspiration bound by vanity and his artistic sophistication tempered by a childlike impetuousness and naivete'. Dregni thankfully does not allow his subject to dodge the dimmer aspects of the spotlight, painting a very human portrait of a man equally unreliable, duplicitous and vain yet devoted, sentimental and generous. Full flight is also given to Django's etherial magic-trick genius which resulted in, at times, perfect examples of inspired expression within the worldly context of a high art. There are many important reasons for Django Reinhardt's enormous influence on music (and jazz in particular), likewise for the legends and stories that surround both him and his surviving legacy, and I feel that this book does a wonderful job putting them into context for us. What an enjoyable and inspiring read.

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.

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