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# GYPSY

# JAZZMEN

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Back in 2000, guitarist Evan Perri was studying jazz at a small music school in St. Paul, Minn., when he got what religious folks think of as the Call. Except it wasn't God calling home a lost soul. It was Django.

The inimitable guitarist Django Reinhardt (1910-53), a Belgian-born Gypsy, was the first European to profoundly influence jazz, and his rhapsodic improvisations and supercharged rhythmic momentum still inspire legions. Once day Perri was flipping through a bargain bin at a record store when he spied a CD by the Quintet of the Hot Club of France, the all-string swing band Reinhardt co-led with violinist Stephane Grappelli in the 1930s. Perri recognized Reinhardt's name but had never heard his music.

"Halfway through the first track, 'Honeysuckle Rose,' I said, 'This is amazing: This is what I've been looking for,'" Perri remembers. "I had been getting bored with jazz because I didn't feel like I was expressing myself in the idiom. But when I discovered Gypsy jazz, it seemed more comfortable. I had never heard it before but it was like I knew it all along."

Today, the Hot Club of Detroit, the Reinhardt-inspired band that

■ A look at Django Reinhardt's life and influence. 4C



TOP: The Hot Club of Detroit performs at the 2006 Detroit Music Awards at the State Theatre.

LEFT: From left, rhythm guitarist Colton Weatherston, lead guitarist Evan Perri and rhythm guitarist Paul Brady enjoy the Hot Club's performance at Fishbone's restaurant in Detroit.

Photos by KIMBERLY P. MITCHELL/Detroit Free Press

### Hear the Hot Club of Detroit

The Hot Club of Detroit's debut CD for Mack Avenue Records was released this week. Here's where you can hear the group live and on the radio in the next month:

■ **7 TONIGHT:** "The Ed Love Program," WDET-FM (101.9 FM)

■ **9 P.M. AUG. 29:** Cadioux Café, 4300 Cadioux, Detroit.

■ **3:15 P.M. SEPT. 4:** Detroit International Jazz Festival. Waterfront Stage, Hart Plaza.

To hear a sample of the Hot Club of Detroit, go to [www.freep.com/music](http://www.freep.com/music).

Perri first formed in 2000 and reorganized in 2003 at Wayne State University, stands on the brink of a national breakthrough.

The sextet's eponymous debut CD on the Mack Avenue label was released this week, and with international distribution, the metro Detroit label offers the kind of exposure that could elevate the Hot Club from its battery of local gigs to high-profile club and festival work in America and Europe.

Or not. The jazz business has always been a crapshoot, and while Mack Avenue is a respected voice, it does not have the clout of a major label. Even the majors, struggling to adapt to digital downloading and distribution, can't break bands the way they used to.

The members of the Hot Club of Detroit are ecstatic about signing with Mack Avenue, but they know they've only just begun to climb the ladder. The band, for example, is still scuffling to secure professional management, which can shop them to out-of-town clubs and presenters.

"The CD ought to at least help get our calls to booking companies returned," says Perri, 27.

Still, recording for a label like Mack Avenue remains a milestone for a young band. "It's still sort of every musician's dream to be on a label," says accordionist Julien Labro.

"There are a lot of great musicians out there, but without distribution it doesn't matter how great you are because no one will hear you. This is an opportunity for all of us on the record to show what we're all about."

**THE CD, THE FIRST** on Mack Avenue by a Detroit band, also opens a new chapter for the label. Mack Avenue was founded in 1998 by Gretchen Valade of



CYBELLE CODISH

Evan Perri formed the Hot Club of Detroit in 2000. Its members are: standing, from left, Colton Weatherston and Julien Labro; seated from left, Paul Brady, Dave Bennett, Perri and Shannon Wade.

Grosse Pointe Farms, a passionate jazz fan with deep pockets — she's the granddaughter of the founder of Carhartt Inc., the Dearborn clothing giant. The label has issued about 30 CDs by an eclectic roster ranging from veterans like Gerald Wilson to young artists like Sean Jones.

Valade says she always wanted a Detroit group on the label as an affirmation of the company's roots. She has already become a major Detroit philanthropist, donating \$10 million this year to endow a nonprofit foundation to support the Detroit International Jazz Festival in perpetuity.

As it happens, the jazz festival played a key role in marrying the Hot Club of Detroit with Mack Avenue. The band earned a spot at the 2004 festival by winning a talent competition.

Soon festival founder Bob McCabe raved about the group to Valade and Mack Avenue president Tom Robinson, who then arranged an audition in front of the label's executives, including chief producer and

talent scout Al Pryor from New York.

**ALL WERE IMPRESSED** with the polish and focus of the group. Valade says her final decision took "about five seconds — maybe 10." A child of the swing era, she was especially taken with clarinetist Dave Bennett, a babyfaced 21-year-old wizard from Waterford who sounds uncannily like Benny Goodman.

"I thought, 'My God, the Benny Goodman Sextet strikes again,'" she says. "They kept saying Django, but I hadn't heard of him. In the old days it was all great clarinetists: Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Woody Herman."

The band's contract essentially guarantees two CDs with options for more depending upon reactions from audiences, media and, of course, sales.

Whether there's a market for a band so out-of-step with contemporary currents is an open question. Of course, the Hot Club of Detroit's singular take on a 70-year-old style is precisely its selling point, and its niche is potentially wider

than it might appear.

Most big cities boast at least one Hot Club-style group, and there is a circuit of jazz festivals large and small devoted to Gypsy jazz, especially in Europe. The music's infectious spirit and easy-to-follow structures still resonate with audiences.

In addition to Perri and Labro and Bennett, the group includes bassist Shannon Wade and the two rhythm guitarists, Colton Weatherston and Paul Brady.

The players range in age from 21 to 34 and all have Michigan roots except Labro, who was born in Marseille, France, and moved to Detroit on the brink of his 18th birthday to study with Peter Soave, a world-class accordionist.

"We want to give Gypsy jazz a modern feel," says Perri, between drags on an ever-present Newport cigarette. "We're not ashamed of where we come from. Our goal is to play music that we love but also make it modern."

At the center of the band's acoustic sound is the piston-like chugging of the guitars derived from the Hot Club of France. Benny Goodman's shadow looms in Bennett's scampering clarinet as well as the presence of accordion — Detroit music writer Jim Gallert points out in the CD's liner notes that Goodman's 1947 quintet included accordion.

The gin-soaked atmosphere of the bals-musette, the Parisian dance halls that nurtured Reinhardt and colors much Gypsy jazz, also settles like a nicotine haze across the minor-tunes.

**MATERIAL BY REINHARDT** or associated with him makes up half of the CD. But it's on more recent tunes like "Leila" by '60s guitar hero Wes Montgomery, or the epic reinvention of Nino Rota's "Godfather Theme," which moves from the shadowy Mafia secrets into a sunny strut through Little Italy, where the band adds more modern ac-

cents.

The soloists each play out of a different bag: Perri's lickety-split improvisations pop with Reinhardt's punchy articulation, but he morphs easily into post-bop ideas and an occasional riff cribbed from rock guitarists. Labro plays with a virtuoso edge. Bennett digs into Goodman until the cows come home.

The Hot Club of Detroit is walking the same esthetic tightrope as any jazz band: The challenge is to honor the tradition but also make it new. Still, there is a particular danger in reviving pre-modern styles because a sepia-toned nostalgia is wired into the music's DNA.

The ultimate measure of the Hot Club of Detroit will not be how much it resembles its idols but how inventively and profoundly it departs from them.

"Taste is the key," says Labro. "We try to stay within certain boundaries, but we are all finding ways that we can express ourselves."

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## Django Reinhardt

Born: Jan. 23, 1910, Liverchie, Belgium

Died: May 16, 1953, Fontainebleau, France.

**Contributions:** Reinhardt was one of the most significant guitarists in jazz and the first European to shape the course of American jazz.



**Django Reinhardt: A key CD**

**Early years:** Raised in a Gypsy encampment

near Paris, he picked up the banjo, guitar and violin and was working professionally at age 12. Trapped in a caravan fire at 18, he suffered major damage to two fingers on his left hand. He relearned to play the guitar, working around his handicap and developing an idiosyncratic yet virtuoso technique.

**Style:** His improvisations featured agile melodic invention and rolling tremolos played with tremendous rhythmic drive, charisma, passion and echoes of Gypsy music. His most important work came between 1934-39 with the Quintet of the Hot Club of France, the band he co-led with violinist Stephane Grappelli, which also included two rhythm guitars and bass. Reinhardt's later work showed a keen ear for the emerging bebop idiom.

**Legacy:** In his day, Reinhardt was admired by top American musicians like Duke Ellington, Coleman Hawkins and Benny Carter. Pianist-composer John Lewis wrote the famous song "Django" in his honor. His influence remains widely felt in the proliferation of Hot Club-style bands and festivals.

**Pop culture connections:** Reinhardt's music and mythology resonates in many corners. He inspired such guitarists as Chet Atkins and Dickey Betts, and his music can be heard on the soundtracks of Woody Allen's "Stardust Memories" and the video game "Mafia." Allen's "Sweet and Lowdown" stars Sean Penn as a guitarist who idolizes Reinhardt.

**Recommended CDs:** "The Best of Django Reinhardt" (Blue Note) is a good introduction. For in-depth exploration, you can't beat "The Complete Django Reinhardt HMV Sessions" (Mosaic). Mail-order only: 203-327-7111 or [www.mosaicrecords.com](http://www.mosaicrecords.com).

- MARK STRYKER