




LEFT-HAND TECHNIQUE

 ver the years, a considerable mystique has surrounded not only Reinhardt's musical legacy but also his singular personal history, which was marked by an early life-altering event. On the night of October 26, 1928, the eighteen-year-old musician returned from a playing engagement to his caravan at a gypsy encampment outside Paris.¹ As he prepared to retire to bed, a candle's open flame accidentally ignited a large pile of celluloid flowers that Bella, his first wife, planned to sell the next day. Bella escaped from the blaze with minor injuries, but the right side of Reinhardt's body was burned so severely that a surgeon at the Hôpital Lariboisière recommended his leg be amputated to prevent gangrene. Reinhardt refused, instead undergoing surgery (under chloroform anesthetic) to open and drain his wounds, which involved the application of silver nitrate to dry the flesh and cause scars to form. During a recovery period of almost two years he regained the use of his leg, but the third and fourth fingers of his left hand were permanently damaged. That Reinhardt managed to relearn his instrument with an entirely new playing technique has been a source of awe and mystery ever since.

Little else is known about Reinhardt's accident or, for that matter, his early life in general. The musette music that he began playing in his early teens was an urban vernacular form that emerged during the late nineteenth century and remained popular as live entertainment in France in the years after World War I. It bears little musical resemblance to jazz. Indeed, the art historian Jody Blake notes that even though musette orchestras—typically three- or four-piece accordion-led ensembles—might superficially seem like a sort of “French equivalent

of the jazz band,” the *bals-musettes* (working-class dance halls) where the music was often played were viewed by contemporary artists such as Jean Cocteau and his circle as the site of an authentically Gallic culture free of the American influences that pervaded postwar French life.² Reinhardt’s conversion from musette to jazz soon after his accident may not have been the only reason he concurrently exchanged his banjo-guitar for a standard guitar. The historian Alain Antonietto raises the possibility that Reinhardt made the change during his convalescence because the guitar required a lighter touch on the fingerboard and thus was less physically demanding.³ The biographer François Billard adds that, in contrast to the banjo’s piercing sonority, the guitar’s mellower sound may have been better suited to the hospital ward where Reinhardt spent his recovery since it would have been less disruptive to the other patients.⁴

The jazz recordings that Reinhardt heard while recovering from his injury probably included those of Eddie Lang (1902–33), the American jazz guitarist whose partnership with the violinist Joe Venuti during the late 1920s and early 1930s is the clearest historical precedent for the Quintet of the Hot Club of France’s all-string instrumentation.⁵ The extent of Lang’s influence on Reinhardt is uncertain. Stéphane Grappelli later remembered that soon after he and Reinhardt met in the early 1930s “we decided every day to do like Eddie Lang and Joe Venuti to amuse ourselves,”⁶ but Reinhardt was also said to have later spoken dismissively of Lang’s playing.⁷ Still, the American’s records would have at least made him aware of the guitar’s possibilities in jazz at the very time that he was adopting both a new instrument and a new musical idiom.

In the absence of concrete information, many writers have tended to romanticize Reinhardt’s biography, often exaggerating his disability either because of misconceptions or for rhetorical effect. Tales of the enigmatic gypsy who miraculously triumphed over dire personal circumstances make for compelling reading but not necessarily for historical accuracy. This chapter seeks to answer two straightforward questions: what was the nature of Reinhardt’s injury and how did it affect his music? The best sources of evidence are films, photographs, and above all sound recordings. Transcriptions are especially useful for comparing his playing before and after the accident and for contrasting his instrumental technique with that of an able-bodied performer (in this case Eddie Lang). Before addressing these, it is worth briefly considering the physiological implications of Reinhardt’s injury from a clinical perspective.

At the very least, photographs show that the third and fourth fingers

of Reinhardt's left hand were, as Ian Cruickshank writes, "deformed" or, in Mike Peters's words, "partially mangled."⁸ But many writers disagree as to whether the affected fingers remained functional. Mike Zwerin, like several other authors, writes that the fingers were paralyzed, although he adds that the guitarist was still able to use these fingers to an extent.⁹ To the contrary, Michael James, in an article in *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, states unequivocally that Reinhardt's accident "deprived him of the use of two fingers."¹⁰ Likewise, biographer Patrick Williams claims that the guitarist's handicap "allowed him only to play notes with three fingers of his hand: the middle finger, the index finger, and the thumb."¹¹ In fact, there is much evidence that Reinhardt actually retained a significant, if substantially limited, level of function in his damaged fingers. A valuable source of reference when interpreting this evidence is the medical literature on hand burns.

The anatomy of the human hand is extraordinarily complex. Its skeletal structure consists of nineteen bones and seventeen joints. Each finger contains three bones, called phalanges (the thumb has only two), and the joint between two phalanges is called an interphalangeal joint. At the base of each finger the longest phalange meets another bone, a metacarpal, at the metacarpophalangeal joint. The metacarpals are in turn attached to the carpals, a group of small bones within the wrist. Motion is controlled by two sets of muscles attached to the bones with tendons. Extrinsic muscles, located in the forearm, are responsible for powerful motion, while intrinsic muscles, located within the hand itself, control delicate, finely coordinated movements.¹² A total of thirty-nine muscles control hand and wrist motion, and there is considerable interdependence: moving one part of the hand often affects the position of another. Finger movement is described as either flexion, when joints are bent toward the palm, or extension, when joints are bent away from the palm.¹³

When the hand is burned by flames, as was Reinhardt's, the damage is most often to the back (dorsum) of the hand ("probably because the back of the hand is exposed when it is used to protect the face and because the hand closes instinctively in flash burns").¹⁴ Burns are classified according to their severity as either "partial thickness," when they are fairly superficial and produce blistering and minor scarring, or "full thickness," when the skin's entire thickness is charred, leaving an open wound that heals with scar tissue lacking the skin's former elasticity.¹⁵ Additionally, "deep burns of the dorsum of the hand are apt to destroy the extensor tendons, especially those over the middle joints of the

fingers,” which inhibits extension of the affected digits.¹⁶ Severe burns to the dorsum of the hand frequently lead to hyperextension of the metacarpophalangeal joints and compensatory flexion of the interphalangeal joints.¹⁷ That is, the fingers are drawn backward at their base joint while their smaller joints curl inward. Photographs show that the permanent effects of Reinhardt’s injury almost exactly corresponded to these conditions: the third and fourth fingers of his left hand were bent backward at their base at an abnormal angle, and the upper joints were partially flexed.¹⁸

Recent decades have seen great advances in all fields of medicine, the treatment of hand injuries being no exception. Doctors are now often able to prevent deformities by using splints to support and protect the burned hand during recovery. In 1928, however, Reinhardt benefited only from care designed to stave off potentially life-threatening infections and otherwise had to cope with his injuries without further treatment. Although his left hand clearly was disfigured, the view of some authors that two of his digits were “useless” or “paralyzed” is misleading. Indeed, the relevant medical literature is notable for the conspicuous absence of the word *paralysis*. Providing that muscle tissue and tendons heal sufficiently, a burned hand may retain a significant level of function within the constrictions of its deformed state.

Several commentators have rightly acknowledged that Reinhardt could still use his damaged fingers. A short discographical booklet published in 1944 by Billy Neill and E. Gates states that:

[Reinhardt] uses the first and second left-hand fingers most of the time in single-note work; in chord work he can make use of the third and fourth fingers to a limited extent on the first two strings. He plays his famous octave passages on any two strings, with a “damped” string in between. . . , avoiding that frenzied rushing up and down the fingerboard which would otherwise be necessary. His famous chromatic runs, if played in the first position, are *fingered*; if played up the fingerboard, they are *glissed* with one finger. He plays unusual chord shapes because of his handicap.¹⁹

This may be an eyewitness description, although, since Reinhardt spent World War II in continental Europe and the booklet was published in England, the authors would probably not, in 1944, have seen him in person for at least five years. It is supported by a definite firsthand account

from Reinhardt's longtime colleague Grappelli, who recalled shortly after the guitarist's death that "he acquired amazing dexterity with those first two fingers, but that didn't mean he never employed the others. He learned to grip the guitar with his little finger on the E string and the next finger on the B. That accounts for some of those chord progressions which Django was probably the first to perform on the guitar . . . at least in the jazz idiom."²⁰

Some recent writers, such as Mike Peters, have repeated Grappelli's claim that Reinhardt was able to use his disabled fingers on the guitar's two highest strings but that these fingers were only used to play chords, while single-string melodies were played with just the two fully functional digits.²¹ Peters also notes that Reinhardt's hands appear to have been larger than average. The critic Whitney Balliett, like Grappelli, speculates that Reinhardt's physical condition may have been partially responsible for his innovative harmonic techniques: "The huge hand made the crippled fingers work nonetheless: thus the mysterious chords and melodic lines that no one had heard before."²²

But these accounts amount to little more than brief asides. A far more detailed and rigorous consideration of Reinhardt's instrumental technique appears in Alexander Schmitz and Peter Maier's biography.²³ Schmitz and Maier begin by asserting that for chord playing "the third finger of Django's left hand was almost always completely functional, so long as it was not required to stretch far from the middle finger."²⁴ They agree that Reinhardt's use of his damaged fingers was primarily confined to the instrument's two highest-pitched strings (the B and high E), which prohibited him from playing those chords that demand considerable wrist supination in order to place the third or fourth fingers on the instrument's middle or lower strings.²⁵ This precludes many fingerings that are merely run-of-the-mill for nondisabled guitarists. The authors also suggest that Reinhardt was able to take advantage of his disability in various ways, for example by barring across up to three strings with his third finger, which fell naturally at an angle more conducive to this technique than it would on a healthy hand.²⁶ They do not, however, support their findings with specific evidence of the guitarist's technique in practice, of which there is of course plenty.

In the late 1990s a short film featuring Reinhardt and the Quintet was discovered.²⁷ *Le Jazz Hot*, made while the group toured England in 1938, begins with a brief staged "Introduction to Jazz," demonstrated by a studio orchestra with an explanatory voice-over. Reinhardt then ap-

pears playing the theme “Tornerai (J’Attendrai),” first alone, next joined by Grappelli in a duet, and finally with the Quintet’s rhythm section. Although the guitarist is on camera for only a few brief stretches, he plainly uses only his index and middle fingers on the fretboard while soloing melodically, corroborating the descriptions of his single-note technique cited earlier. His unaccompanied introduction also includes some chordal playing, and he unmistakably uses his disabled third and fourth fingers at several points. A number of still photographs of Reinhardt playing also confirm that he was able to use both his third and fourth fingers on the guitar’s uppermost strings to play chords.²⁸ Yet photographs present only static records of a dynamic physical activity; for more clues, recordings provide much additional information.

To gauge the impact of Reinhardt’s injury on his guitar technique, we can begin by comparing his playing before the October 1928 accident with that of his later career. He made fifteen known recordings between May and October of 1928. On each he has a solely accompanimental role as banjo-guitarist within a three-part musette ensemble dominated by an accordionist and also featuring at various times a whistler, slide-whistle, xylophone, or other percussion. The recordings are less than ideal historical sources because their sound quality is poor and even the original pitch is uncertain. (The original instrumental tunings are not known for sure, and, as is not infrequently the case with recordings of this vintage, inconsistent turntable speeds at any stage of the recording and reproduction process may have distorted the sounding pitch.)²⁹ Furthermore, because Reinhardt is featured only as an accompanist, his playing is sometimes difficult to hear beneath the lead instruments. For these reasons, the transcription process involves a certain amount of guesswork.

Example 1.1 transcribes a short passage from “Miss Columbia” (9–10/28; mx. H 966-B), a tune that Reinhardt (identified on the original record label as “Jeangot”) recorded with the accordionist Marceau Verschuere in the fall of 1928, just weeks before the caravan fire.³⁰ The transcription gives a hypothetical tablature for Reinhardt’s banjo-guitar accompaniment, following standard notational conventions and assuming that, as most sources suggest, the banjo-guitar’s strings are tuned identically to standard guitar tuning (E2–A2–D3–G3–B3–E4).³¹ Accordingly, the six tablature lines represent the instrument’s six strings, with the lowest pitched (E2) represented by the lowest line. Directly beneath each note (or chord) on the ordinary treble-clef staff, the tablature indicates which string is sounded and at which fret number. For instance, a zero appearing on the highest line of the tablature staff indi-

cates that the guitar’s high E string is sounded as an open string; likewise, the number 2 written on the next-to-highest line indicates that the B string is sounded while being depressed at the second fret (producing the pitch C \sharp 4, two half steps higher).

0:03
 Accordion
 Banjo-Guitar
 Left-Hand Fingering
 TAB

EXAMPLE 1.1. Performance of “Miss Columbia” (9–10/28; mx. H 966-B)

Unsurprisingly, having at the time a fully functional left hand, Reinhardt uses all four fingers on “Miss Columbia.” In the given excerpt he plays an “oompah” accompaniment: in four–four time, a bass line played on the instrument’s middle and lower strings on beats one and three alternates with chords played on the higher strings on beats two and four. The descending half-note bass progression E–D \sharp –C \sharp –B is probably played using the left pinkie and middle finger on the pitches C \sharp and B respectively. These two notes are played on the instrument’s A string at the fourth and second fret while the first finger depresses the G string at the first fret. Thus, the wrist is heavily supinated, enabling the fourth finger to reach across the fingerboard. Such a fingering, while quotidian in the hands of any modestly accomplished guitarist, would have been entirely impossible for Reinhardt after 1928.

Yet he was still playing the same sorts of accompaniments a decade later and in a jazz style that was more harmonically and texturally varied. Example 1.2 transcribes the beginning of a 1938 recording of “It Had To Be You” in which Reinhardt alone accompanied Grappelli’s violin (2/1/38; mx. DTB 3533-1) (his solo guitar introduction is omitted). A proposed tablature and left-hand fingering for the guitar part are also given. The left-hand fingering is displayed between the guitar staff and tablature with the index finger through the pinkie numbered 1–4 and the thumb labeled “T.” Where Reinhardt strikes two or more notes simultaneously, the fingering numbers are arranged vertically, with the

highest-sounding string (usually also the highest-sounding pitch) at the top and the others in order beneath it. The first chord in m. 1.1, for instance, is played with the middle finger (2) placed across both the A and D strings at the fifth fret (sounding the pitches D3 and G3), the index finger (1) on the G string at the fourth fret (sounding the pitch B3), and the ring finger (3) on the B string at the fifth fret (sounding E4).

The given tablature and fingering suggest that instead of using his weaker fingers to play a bass line within an oompah accompaniment, as he did in 1928, Reinhardt would often play the bass line with his first and second fingers and create chords by barring across the higher strings with any of his first three fingers. The chords in mm. 1.3–1.4, 1.9–1.10, and 1.15–1.16, for example, all have the third finger barred across the upper three strings. Alternatively, Reinhardt could use his thumb for the bass line by curling it over the guitar neck so as to reach the instrument's lowest two strings (as in mm. 1.2 and 1.11–1.13). While able-bodied guitarists also sometimes find it convenient to use the left thumb in this way,³² Reinhardt probably had to rely on it more because he had fewer alternatives. The three- and four-note chords in “It Had To Be You” illustrate that, in addition to using harmonies requiring only his healthy index and middle fingers, Reinhardt frequently employed his disabled third finger too. None of the chords in example 1.2 calls for the fourth finger on the left hand (although since the indicated fingerings are merely speculative it is conceivable that he used it).

More of Reinhardt's chord-playing techniques are displayed in the unaccompanied performance transcribed in example 1.3, an excerpt from a 1937 recording of “A Little Love, A Little Kiss” (4/26/37; mx. OLA 1716-1). The passage shown is from an a cappella rendition of the song's verse that follows a short violin and guitar introduction and precedes the rhythm section's entry for the solo choruses (again, a proposed tablature and left-hand fingering are given).³³ None of the thirty-seven chords shown in this example requires the guitarist's fourth finger (some of the chords are repeated, so there are only about twenty-five or so different chords). Fifteen do, however, use the third finger; in each instance Reinhardt uses it only to depress the instrument's high E string, with the possible exception of the final chord in m. 5. This particular chord (G–C#–E#–A) may have been played with the third finger on the B string, as indicated, although it is also playable by using the second finger to depress simultaneously both the G and B strings.

But if Reinhardt did indeed play the music in example 1.3 without using his left pinkie, he would in several instances have had to stretch

0:10 $\text{♩} = 204$ 1.1

Violin

Guitar

Left-Hand Fingering

TAB

1.2

1.5

EXAMPLE 1.2. Improvisation on “It Had To Be You” (2/1/38; mx. DTB 3533-1)

1.8

1.11

1.14

EXAMPLE 1.2. (*cont.*)

0:12 A cappella, rubato

Guitar

Left-Hand	1	2	2	3	1	1	0	1	0	3	3	0	0	3	1
Hand	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1
Fingering	2	2	2	2	2	1	0	1	0	1	2	2	2	1	1

TAB

3

0 3 1 3 2 3 3 0 0 2 0 2 0 2 0 1 2 3 3 0 3 1 1

1 1 1 1 2 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1

0 1 2 3 2 0 2 0 2 0 1 2 2 3 2 2 2 1 2 2 2 2 1 2

2 1 1

10 7 9 5 3 2 0 3 7 0 0 2 3 5 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3

7 7 7 3 1 1 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

0 7 7 7 4 1 1 2 2 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

0 0

9 D Bmin Emin A7

0 1 2 2 1 2 2 2

(Rhythm section enters)

2 5 6 5 3 3

2 2

0 0

EXAMPLE 1.3. Improvisation on “A Little Love, A Little Kiss” (4/26/37; mx. OLA 1716-1)

his ring finger quite far from his middle finger. The first chord in m. 1 (G \sharp -D-E \sharp -C \sharp), the first chord in m. 2 (E-A \sharp -C \sharp -A), and the final chord in m. 4 (G \sharp -D-F \sharp -C \sharp) would all require his index finger at a given fret, the second finger a fret higher, and the third finger two more frets higher than the second finger. This appears to contradict Schmitz and Maier's view that Reinhardt was unable to stretch his disabled third finger far from the second (although the guitarist's large hands may not have found this such a stretch). Alternatively, he might have played the highest notes of these chords with his pinkie on the high E string. Without visual evidence, recordings cannot always reveal conclusively how Reinhardt fingered a given chord.

It is possible, though, to generalize about the relationship between the guitarist's physical state and his music by comparing his technique with that of an unimpaired performer. Reinhardt's performance of "A Little Love, A Little Kiss" was likely inspired by Eddie Lang's 1927 recording of the same tune (5/28/27; mx. W 80941-D). Lang's version is entirely unaccompanied (Reinhardt is supported by the full Quintet during the rest of his solo, which is not transcribed here). Like Reinhardt, Lang plays the song in D major and begins with a similarly free, rubato rendition of its verse, which is transcribed in example 1.4.³⁴ Despite their other dissimilarities, these two interpretations of the same theme, one seldom heard in jazz, represent one of the most likely signs of the American's direct influence on Reinhardt.

From a technical standpoint, Lang's version serves as a stark reminder that Reinhardt's disability was, despite his adaptability, considerable. A majority of Lang's chords containing four or more notes would have been unplayable for Reinhardt. Musically speaking, Lang therefore plays many more chords containing intervals of less than a major third between adjacent notes. Since a guitar's strings are tuned in perfect fourths, except for the major third between the G and B strings, a player wishing to create intervals smaller than the interval between any two adjacent open strings must heavily supinate his or her wrist so as to stop a given string at a higher fret than that of the neighboring higher string. For instance, in m. 7 of example 1.4, Lang creates a major second, G-A, by stopping the B string at the eighth fret with his pinkie and the high E string at the fifth fret with his index finger. This requires wrist supination so that the fourth finger can reach a lower string than the first finger. Lang employs various other chord fingerings with similar physical demands; they are indicated in example 1.4 wherever a left-hand finger number appears beneath a lower finger number, such as in

A cappella, rubato

0:00

Guitar (Lang)

Left-Hand Fingering

TAB

4

7

9

EXAMPLE 1.4. Improvisation on “A Little Love, A Little Kiss” (5/28/27; mx. W 80941-D), performed by Eddie Lang

11

1 4 1 3 1 1 4
 1 1 1 1 3 1 1
 2 1 1 1 2 1 1
 1 1

3 0 4 4
 1 3
 2 1

3 0 0 0
 2 3 3 2 1

5 10 7 9 5 7
 5 7 7 7 7 4
 5 7 7 4 4

2 1 2 0 2 3
 0 2 0 0 0 7
 0 2 2 0 9 8

13

3 3 1 4 2 1 4
 1 1 3
 2 2 2

1 4 3
 0 2 1

0 3 0 3
 2 2 2 3
 0 0 1 4

5 7 8 10 8 7 10
 5 7 9 4 4 4 4

0 2 1 3 2 0 0
 0 2 0 0 0 3
 0 2 4 2 3

EXAMPLE 1.4. (*cont.*)

m. 1, where the fourth finger depresses the G string while the second finger stops the B string. Even though Reinhardt could use these sorts of fingerings, too, with his healthy index and middle fingers, he tended to heavily favor chords in which any two adjacent strings are stopped at the same fret (e.g., by barring with a single finger) or in which a given string is stopped at a higher fret than its lower neighbor. This is especially the case with the interval between the highest pair of notes in Reinhardt's chosen chords, which are most often played on the instrument's uppermost strings (tuned at the interval of a perfect fourth). In other words, Reinhardt's chords usually contain an interval of at least a perfect fourth between their highest two pitches. Lang, of course, often used such formations as well (they are, after all, also easier for a nondisabled person to play). But overall he used many more closely voiced harmonies than Reinhardt did.

The foregoing evidence confirms that, although Reinhardt's injury greatly constrained his instrumental technique, he retained a substantial degree of function in the disfigured third finger of his left hand. And though his disability greatly limited the range of chords available to him, ruling out many close voicings, he was partially able to compensate for it, for instance by using his thumb to play bass notes on the guitar's

lower strings. Still, his use of the thumb and disabled fingers seems to have been associated solely with chord playing. All evidence suggests that when soloing with single-string melodies he relied on only his fully functional index and middle fingers.

Because Reinhardt's recordings from before the accident feature him only as an accompanist, they present very few examples of single-string playing for comparison with his later work. But on several brief occasions the young musician used arpeggiated harmonies or a counter-melody instead of his customary chordal accompaniment. Example 1.5 transcribes one such instance from "Moi Aussi" (9–10/28; mx. 968-A), recorded at the same 1928 session as "Miss Columbia." Here, while accordionist Verschueren and a whistler (identified on the original label as simply "Erardy") state the melody in unison, Reinhardt plays an obligato-like melodic accompaniment based on rising and falling two-octave arpeggiations of a dominant-seventh harmony (B7 in the key of E major). The proposed fingering given beneath the guitar staff suggests that he may have used all four left-hand fingers, traversing all of the instrument's strings but the lowest. This would have allowed his hand to remain between the fingerboard's sixth and tenth frets rather than shifting up and down the guitar neck. In the wake of his injury such fingerings were often no longer feasible.

For comparison, some examples of Reinhardt's mature single-string solo work appear in example 1.6, which shows excerpts from a performance of "Sweet Georgia Brown" (12/21/37; mx. OLA 2220-1) that he recorded in 1937 as a duet with Grappelli accompanying at the piano. In example 1.6a the guitarist plays a diminished-seventh arpeggiation that ascends almost two octaves from F#3 through D#5 (as will be seen in

1:01 $\text{♩} = 288$

The image shows a musical score for the piece "Moi Aussi". It consists of four staves: Whistle, Accordion, Banjo-Guitar, and TAB. The Whistle and Accordion parts are simple, each playing a single note (G4) in the key of E major (one sharp). The Banjo-Guitar part is a melodic line in E major, consisting of two phrases: the first phrase is G4-A4-B4-A4-G4, and the second phrase is F#4-E4-D4-C4-B3-A2-G2. The TAB part shows the fretting for the Banjo-Guitar part, with the first phrase being 6-9-7-9-8 and the second phrase being 7-10-7-9-7-10-7-8-9-7-9.

Whistle

Accordion

Banjo-Guitar

Left-Hand Fingering

TAB

EXAMPLE 1.5. Performance of "Moi Aussi" (9–10/28; mx. 968-A)

chapter 3, this is one of his favored melodic formulas). When fingered using only the index and middle fingers, this figure is most comfortably executed by progressively shifting the left hand from the instrument's fourth fret up to the eleventh (and finally the twelfth). A guitarist with all fingers available could, using a more orthodox fingering such as that shown in example 1.6b, execute the same figure while remaining between the seventh and twelfth frets.³⁵

Examples 1.6c and 1.6d, from the same solo, are both melodic sequences incorporating a repeated open string. Example 1.6c, another of Reinhardt's melodic formulas, is an ascending sequence in which the guitar's open D string provides a pedal tone beneath a series of triplet arpeggiations. It can be played using only the first two fingers of the left hand in alternation across adjacent strings (which requires considerable physical coordination to accomplish at Reinhardt's tempo of quarter note = 204). In example 1.6d the guitarist plays a chromatically descending sequence of triplets consisting of broken octaves, struck with two downstrokes in his right hand, interspersed with upstrokes sounding the open E string. He plays the broken octaves with his left forefinger depressing the G string and another finger—perhaps the middle finger, as notated here, but quite possibly one of the disabled fingers—on the high E string. Simultaneous octave doublings were one of Reinhardt's trademark techniques; example 1.6e shows an instance from the solo's closing measures. As described earlier by Neill and Gates, the octaves are sounded by depressing two nonadjacent strings while a single intervening string is damped by light pressure from the first finger.

The astonishing facility with which Reinhardt executed these sorts of rapid, technically daunting effects was a milestone in the historical evolution of guitar technique. Despite his handicap, Reinhardt can yet be regarded as a forerunner of the cult of guitar virtuosity that has emerged in recent decades. Neither his predecessors, such as Eddie Lang, nor other swing era guitarists, such as Charlie Christian (1916–42), equaled Reinhardt's technical achievements in terms of sheer physical speed. But since World War II, and particularly with the rise of the electric guitar, guitarists of all stripes have often placed a premium on velocity. (Within the gypsy jazz genre that Reinhardt inspired, this tendency has sometimes been criticized for prioritizing physical technique over artistic substance.)³⁶ Although such a broad trend cannot be credited to any single individual, Reinhardt set an important precedent.

Eventually it was Christian, not Reinhardt, who became the defining influence on future generations of jazz guitarists. Christian's style,

0:17 $\text{♩} = 204$ D7

Guitar

1.12

G

a

Left-Hand Fingering 1 2 1 2 1 2 1 2 2

TAB

b

1:31 D7

c

3.10

3.11

2:37 E7

d

5.2

EXAMPLE 1.6. Improvisation on “Sweet Georgia Brown” (12/21/37; mx. OLA 2220-1)

The image shows two staves of musical notation for guitar. The first staff is in treble clef with a 3/4 time signature. It features a melodic line with triplets and chords. Chords are labeled as Emin, B7, Emin, and B7. Fret numbers are indicated below the staff: 11-12, 8-9-9, 12-11-14, 9-8-11, 12-11-12-14-12, 9-8-9-11-9, 12-11-8-7, 9-8-5-4. The second staff is in bass clef, showing a bass line with fret numbers: 5-7-8, 7-10-14, 12, 5-5-3-0, 3-3-0-0, 2-4-5, 4-7-11, 9, 2-0, 0-0, 3.

EXAMPLE 1.6. (*cont.*)

shaped principally by the blues and western swing of his Oklahoma origins, as well as the playing of tenor saxophonist Lester Young,³⁷ showed few obvious signs of his European contemporary's influence, although there are intriguing accounts of him replicating Reinhardt's solos from memory in live concerts.³⁸ In fact, although the Quintet of the Hot Club of France's records were available in the United States during the 1930s, Reinhardt's stateside reputation was still quite modest when Christian began performing.³⁹ Later some of Reinhardt's original instrumental techniques were adopted by other players; octave doublings, for example, reappeared as a signature device in the playing of Wes Montgomery, the leading jazz guitarist of the 1960s.⁴⁰

The most influential aspect of Reinhardt's guitar playing—his phenomenal digital velocity—was thus, paradoxically, in an area where his injury might appear to have been most disadvantageous. Misconceptions about his disability have fostered an enduring conundrum: the handicap seems enormously significant in theory yet spectacularly irrelevant in practice. Even if it was less severe than many writers have suggested, Reinhardt's injury nonetheless represented a colossal challenge, imposing considerable limitations on his instrumental technique. That he surmounted this challenge attests not so much to the inconsequence of his affliction as to his extraordinary feat in transcending it.