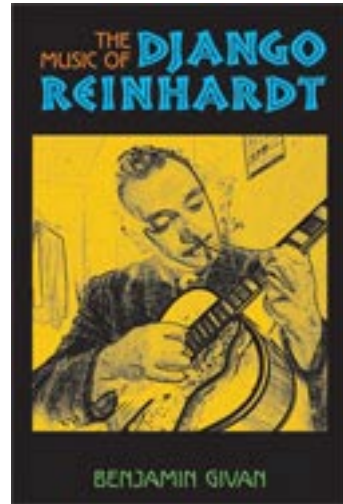


## Q&A with Benjamin Givan, author of *The Music of Django Reinhardt*

When most people think of the great jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt, they conjure up the unusual details of his colorful life: a childhood spent in gypsy encampments outside of Paris; the tragic caravan fire when he was eighteen that rendered his left hand nearly unusable; and his survival during World War II, when gypsies were massacred by the hundreds of thousands. The amazing story of Reinhardt's life even became the basis for Woody Allen's *Sweet and Lowdown*.

Yet, it is the music of Django Reinhardt that made him one of the most original guitarists in history. In particular, his partnership with violinist Stéphane Grappelli, in the Quintette du Hot Club de France, brought him international renown and the attention of some of the most important American jazz musicians of the day, including Coleman Hawkins, Benny Carter, and Duke Ellington.

*The Music of Django Reinhardt* explores the story of the man and his music as never before. Benjamin Givan shows how one of jazz's greatest guitarists created his unparalleled sound. This book is an analytical study of his music, including his process, his improvisational style, and his instrumental technique.



### ***The University of Michigan Press: Why did you choose Reinhardt as a subject?***

**Benjamin Givan:** I chose Reinhardt as a subject because I had enjoyed listening to his music for a long time. I was aware that most of the previously published literature on Reinhardt consisted of either biographical studies geared toward the casual jazz fan or “how-to” books oriented toward people who want to learn how to play the music. And I thought that Reinhardt’s music deserved to be taken seriously at a more scholarly level in order to gain a more thorough, detailed understanding of what and how he played.

### ***UMP: What impact did his music have on the genre?***

**BG:** Reinhardt did not have a huge impact on what we think of as the core American jazz tradition, although many musicians, especially guitarists, have cited him as an influence. He did play an important role in establishing the guitar as a credible solo instrument in jazz. His virtuosic horn-like improvisations predated Charlie Christian’s and his use of doubled octaves and block chords foreshadowed Wes Montgomery’s. In the last couple of decades the so-called “gypsy jazz” style, which takes Reinhardt as its guiding inspiration, has gained an increasingly high profile.

### ***UMP: What made it so compelling for musicians?***

**BG:** Different musicians have probably been drawn to different aspects of his playing. Some have probably been impressed by his sheer instrumental virtuosity—his speed and facility on the guitar—although he’s hardly unique in that regard since there have been many guitarists with comparable, or

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even greater, technical agility. His harmonic language is quite sophisticated for its time, comparable to that of American swing-era soloists such as Coleman Hawkins, and during the 1930s its chromaticism was perhaps exceeded only by the work of pianists like Art Tatum and composers like Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, and so forth. As an improviser, Reinhardt crafted solos that are fluent and cohesive yet also full of surprises and unexpected twists and turns.

***UMP: How did Reinhardt's dramatic life story affect his music?***

**BG:** Like any artist, Reinhardt was a product of his environment; his music reflects the time and place in which he lived and the music he encountered. He played the guitar because it was a common instrument among early-twentieth-century Manouche gypsies. He played jazz because it was a popular music in France during the interwar years. He had plenty of time to hone his craft because, lacking formally schooling, he had fewer commitments to compete with his musical interests early in life. And because he was only marginally literate and accustomed to a rather itinerant lifestyle, he had few better options in life than to pursue a career in music. Certainly, the severe accident he suffered in his late teens, which permanently disabled a couple of his left fingers, limited his musical technique, but not all that much and I doubt he would have played much differently if it had never occurred.

***UMP: What modern composers/musicians still reflect his influence?***

**BG:** Probably the "gypsy jazz" musicians reflect his influence the most, but beyond that I can't really say because, having little interest in them, I am only familiar with a few prominent figures such as the guitarist Biréli Lagrène.

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For more about *The Music of Django Reinhardt*, visit the University of Michigan Press website at:  
<http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=119336>