

“LA POMPE”

The Role of the Rhythm Guitar Player
In the Gypsy Jazz Ensemble
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1 - Introduction to Jazz Manouche

Gypsy jazz (also known as Jazz Manouche, gypsy swing or hot club jazz) is a jazz style generally accepted to have been started by the Romani guitarist Django Reinhardt in Paris during the 1930s. The style is known as Jazz Manouche, partly due to Reinhardt being from the Manouche Sinti clan.

In 1934, Django Reinhardt and Stephane Grappelli introduced a jazz line-up with no drums or horns. But it did have strings and this instrumental line-up had not been heard before. Their ensemble was called the Quintette du Hot Club de France (QHCF), comprising three guitars, one violin and a double bass.

Django Reinhardt was foremost among a group of gypsy guitarists working in Paris from the 1930s to the 1950s. Many gypsy musicians worked in Paris in popular 'Bal Musette' ensembles in which the lead instrument was typically an accordion with banjo accompaniment. The banjo was popular since it was a loud instrument and could compete with the accordion in noisy venues.

Stylistic performance elements of both the accordion and the banjo appear in the "gypsy jazz" sound, with arpeggios and decorations typical of accordionists transferred to the rhythm guitar, and a right hand attack applied to the lead acoustic guitar to achieve maximum volume in an era of little or no electric amplification.

Another element of the ensemble sound was the use of stringed instruments only, which was unusual for its day. The absence of brass lead instruments and drums or traps was a novelty in a jazz context, as well as the use of the double bass which had taken over from the brass bass (sousaphone) to play bass lines.

The absence of drums was compensated for by a highly rhythmic and percussive style of guitar accompaniment called "*La Pompe*" which supplied both rhythm and harmonic support for the soloists.

Gypsy jazz can be performed on guitars alone with or without double bass. But in the QHCF, solos were shared between Reinhardt on guitar and jazz violinist Stephane Grappelli. Later line-ups of the Quintette featured clarinet, saxophone or voice as alternate lead instruments to the guitar, and these are sometimes featured in contemporary gypsy jazz ensembles in place of the violin, although obviously departing from the original "all-strings" format.

Later recordings made by Django in the late 40's and early 50's feature piano and kit drums in the rhythm section, with Django himself playing the new-fangled electric guitar. These recordings were heavily influenced by Django's visit to the USA and his contact with Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong.

2 - Historical Background

Jean 'Django' Reinhardt was born in 1910 and lived only to the age of 43, until his untimely death in 1953 in the village of Samois-sur-Seine in France. In his teenage years he learned to play on a banjo-guitar, which had 6 strings and a banjo vellum head, utilising the standard guitar tuning of E A D G B E, which is still used today.

In 1928, Reinhardt was seriously injured in a caravan fire, suffering severe burns to his left hand and right leg. After a long recovery, he regained partial use of his left hand, but was forced to devise simplified fingerings and chord shapes to permit him to continue to play the guitar. His left hand mobility was severely compromised following injuries sustained in the caravan fire, with use of thumb, index and middle fingers and only minimal articulation of his third and fourth fingers.

His extraordinary skill attracted the attention of the Hot Club of France which was a jazz appreciation society, formed in 1932 by a dedicated group of jazz enthusiasts, who organised concerts.

In 1934 the Quintet of the Hot Club de France was formed, with an original line-up of Stephane Grappelly (later spelt Grappelli) (violin), Django Reinhardt (guitar), Roger Chaput (guitar), Joseph Reinhardt, (Django's brother) (guitar) and Louis Vola (double bass).

Reinhardt and his band used a range of guitar models available in France, but dominant among them was the Selmer guitar (a.k.a. Selmer-Maccaferri or Maccaferri guitar) designed and signed by Italian luthier Mario Maccaferri. Maccaferri parted company with Selmer in 1933 and later models were just known as "Selmer".

These guitars were made in two first versions, the earliest with a large "D" shaped sound hole, the Grande Bouche and later models with a smaller "O" shaped sound hole, the Petite Bouche. Both models were originally constructed with 12th fret to body, following the traditional construction of the Spanish classical guitar.

The Petite Bouche models are considered most suited to lead guitar playing. Today, designs based on this model are popular enough to be marketed as "gypsy jazz guitars" and are the guitars of choice for most players on account of their sound projection, responsiveness and particular tonal characteristics.

The "D Hole" of Grande Bouche models are favoured by rhythm guitar players, but are often seen playing the lead part.

Variations on the original designs included models with 12th or 14th fret to body, for both Petite Bouche and Grande Bouche models. A small number of Grande Bouche models were fitted with an internal resonator box, which was supposed to improve the sound projection of the instrument. This frequently proved to be more trouble than it was worth since the resonator often became detached and rattled around inside the instrument.

3 – Style Development

The original Quintette du Hot Club de France played acoustically without a drummer, making use of the acoustic guitar as a lead instrument. In addition the violin also played the melody and both guitar and violin are still the main solo instruments in contemporary ensembles. Some bands also include clarinet, accordion and occasionally mandolin.

Since the line-up does not normally feature a kit drummer, the rhythm guitar must provide a solid and often percussive accompaniment which is known as “*La Pompe*” or Gypsy Pump. This effectively replaces the drums.

“*La Pompe*” may be compared to the “boom-chick” accompaniment on bluegrass music and tends to emphasize the 2nd and 4th beats of each bar. The hand and forearm of the strumming hand must not rest on the top of the guitar, to allow the maximum volume of the instrument to be available when required. Ensembles prefer to aim for an acoustic sound even when playing amplified concerts, and always in informal jam sessions.

The rhythm player traditionally plays 4 down strokes in the bar, accentuating the 2nd and 4th beats. He releases the fretting hand after each down stroke, which shortens the duration of the chord, providing a percussive effect. This technique is known as the half mute.

In the early development of gypsy jazz, most players learned to play guitar by rote, imitating the chord shapes and strumming styles demonstrated to them by an experienced player. Today, this still remains the most effective way to learn the style.

Musical literacy was either non-existent or at best very basic and there was little opportunity to learn to read musical notation. Players used simple closed chord shapes which were easily learned and could be transposed to different keys simply by shifting position on the fretboard. See section 9 for examples.

From Gypsy Jazz Michael Dregni p.61

“Behind Django, Nin-Nin (nick-name of Django’s brother, Joseph Reinhardt) and Roger Chaput pump out “*La Pompe*”, the fierce *boom-chik, boom-chik* rhythm that would become the trademark of Gypsy Jazz. Their chording was based on Balkan Tziganes music, striking each beat with a percussive strum, any sustain choked off by dampening the strings instantly after the downward stroke. Django and the other Gypsy guitarist hit the first and third beats with bass notes – often alternating notes – then accentuated the second and fourth beats with chords. Each beat was quick and crisp, a combination of a guitar’s chords, a bass’s walking line and a drum’s beat, creating a full band’s sound with a minimum of instrumentation.

The pompeurs adopted this Tziganes rhythm to accompany waltzes and java in the *bals musettes* as well as four-four time foxtrots. The sound of *La Pompe* was best when it was *leger et sec* (light and dry), making an ideal rhythmic accompaniment to a violin, accordion, or as the music developed, a solo guitar.

The basic *pompe* could then be accentuated by half-note fills and quick rhythmic triplets, such as strummed adaptations of the Gypsy flamenco *rasqueado* which flamenco players played with a quick unfurling of their fingernails across the strings. This device became known as *les trousseaux de clés* - the shaking of a bunch of keys.

To drive the harmonic chords, rhythm players added tremolo chords, echoing the sound of balalaikas from *café russe* orchestras."

The basic *pompe* would be adapted to provide suitable accompaniment for waltzes, ballads, Bossa Nova and other Latin styles as required.

4 – Examples of Gypsy Ensemble Line-ups

Gypsy jazz ensembles commonly use the following players:

Duo

2 x guitars only or

1 x guitar plus a lead instrument which may be Violin, Clarinet or accordion (which could also provide a bass line) or a vocalist.

Trio

As above + bass or 2 x guitars plus a vocalist or lead melody instrument.

Quartet

Typically utilising a Violin or Clarinet lead or vocalist + 2 x guitars + bass

Quintet Format

Probably the best known format is Violin, 3 x guitars + bass, as exemplified by the Quintette du Hot Club de France. The Quintet format provides opportunities to introduce a wider variety of instruments, plus a vocalist if required.

Typical Quintet line-ups may be:

3 x Guitars (2 x rhythm and 1 x lead)	Bass	Violin or Clarinet or vocalist
2 x Guitars (1 x rhythm + 1 x lead)	Bass	Violin & Accordion

Note the absence of kit drums in all of the above line ups.

5 – Style & Playing Technique

Important Technique Points

Here is a summary of the important points of technique which will allow you to play “La Pompe” in an authentic manner when starting out

- Relax the wrist of your strumming hand
- Use down strokes **only** at first
- Use left hand release to keep chord sounds short
- Mute un-played strings with your fretting hand
- Use detached bass notes, especially when working without a bass player
- Occasional use of octaves is OK but don't overdo it!
- Do not rest the forearm on the body of the guitar
- When you start out, use all down strokes
- Both Traditional La Pompe and Down stroke La Pompe share the same two down strokes.

Holding the pick

Type of picks – For Gypsy Guitar, the plectrum is usually quite thick, from 2mm – 5mm and made of hard material. The pick is held firmly (but not too tightly) between the thumb and the index finger of the strumming hand.

Modern La Pompe

- Modern La Pompe style uses all Down Strokes as follows
Short - Shorter - Short - Shorter
- In the first down stroke, don't involve your wrist
- In the second down stroke, use your wrist like a whip
- In both movements, use the right side of the nail of your index finger along with your pick
- Hit all the strings with each down stroke

- All down strokes are kept short in duration by releasing the pressure of the fretting hand after each stroke. This technique is known as “half muting”.

Traditional La Pompe

- Includes a shorter semi-damped up stroke with some pitch information
Short - Shorter - Short - Shorter
Down - Down / Up - Down - Down / Up

- Precede the first down stroke with a short up stroke and follow it with a quick jump of your right hand towards the upper part of your guitar body, so that you finish this movement with your right hand up, close to the upper part of the guitar body.
- Emphasise the sound of the lower strings more than the sound of the upper strings
- For the down stroke, play the same “slap” that you played in the down stroke La Pompe.
- Emphasise the sound of the upper strings more than the lower strings
- Use your elbow
- Your wrist should be slightly bent
- BUT watch the up strokes - it can get messy

6 - REMEMBER

- Keep the form of the piece. Soloists will be unforgiving of fundamental error.
- Practice with a metronome
- Use a solid and simple approach
- Not too many embellishments
- Each beat should be short and half-muted
- Use long chords sparingly
- Do not impede the lead player
- **Do** play at low volume. If you cannot hear the soloist, then you are playing too loud!
- Remember that **playing softly** allows greater dynamic range
- Make it swing. Think swung quavers.
- Beats 1 & 3 no accent, beats 2 & 4 accented, so the emphasis is on beats 2 & 4
- Use a closed strumming hand – an open hand creates too much momentum and your arm will quickly tire
- Play 6 strings as one
Leger et Sec = Short & Dry
- Use the round edge of the pick for rhythm playing. This allows a greater contact area of the pick with the strings with improved control and tone.
- Fretting Hand technique – Half Muting - release every beat after you have hit the chord. Half muting means less strain on your fretting hand.
- Do not grip too hard with your fretting hand, since you will quickly tire and the music will suffer
- Plectrum Hand Technique
On beats 1 & 3 - flick your wrist and hit the bottom 3 or 4 strings
On beats 2 & 4 - move your arm and hit 5 or 6 strings

- Stylistic Embellishments
- The “Shuffle”. Consecutive up and down strokes with half muting. This can occasionally be heard on some early QHCF recordings. Normally only one guitar player will play this embellishment, the other rhythm player will play 4 in the bar down strokes only.
- Tremolando. A technique borrowed from mandolin & balalaika players which is used to create and release tension in the music. This requires the player to execute rapid up and down strokes with the plectrum, often simultaneously with chromatic chord runs, to provide dramatic effects.

As with all embellishments, these should be used sparingly. You can have too much of a good thing

7 – Harmonic Function

An important feature of “La Pompe” is the chord shapes Django was forced to use due to his hand injury, sustained in a near fatal caravan fire. As a consequence, standard bar (or *barre*) chords are not used very often in in gypsy jazz.

Common major and minor chords are rarely used, but are invariably embellished.

Major chords are frequently embellished with the major 7th or 6th and 6th/9th.

Minor chords feature heavily in jazz manouche which is full of re-harmonisations aimed at giving a minor flavour to the music even if the song is written in a major key. The minor 6th chord is often substituted for the sub-dominant. Dominant sevenths are also altered by flattening the 9th or 13th.

Gypsy jazz has its own set of frequently played standard tunes, which are distinct from the standards found in mainstream and modern jazz.

However, contemporary gypsy jazz players will adapt almost any type of song to the Manouche style. Gypsy swing standards include jazz hits of the '20s and '30s, such as Limehouse Blues, Dinah, original melodies by Reinhardt, including his well-known ballad “Nuages”.

Many tunes are written in minor keys, one of the best known being “Minor Swing”. Dorian and harmonic minor modes are frequently heard, giving a dark, modal sound to the tunes which contrasts with the up-tempo and spirited performance style.

Chord voicings are usually based on closed triad shapes which can be easily shifted from one position to another on the fretboard. Simple triad shapes frequently perform several functions, depending on the musical context and bass notes. The triad voicings have the advantage of simplicity and also do not impede the solo player, providing a more open and airy framework to support improvisation by the soloist.

8 – Percussive Function

Since the typical Gypsy Jazz line-up does not normally include a drummer, the rhythm guitar player has two important roles to fulfil.

Firstly, not only must there be harmonic support for the soloist, secondly, there is also a percussive and rhythmic function which is vitally important to the overall sound of the ensemble.

The original Quintette du Hot Club de France line-up included two rhythm guitars, one lead guitar and violin and bass to complete the Quintette, but the band at its inception was in fact a quartet with just one rhythm guitarist.

Django was said to have complained to Stephane Grappelli that when Grappelli played, he had the benefit of two guitars in the rhythm section, but when he, Django, was soloing, he had only one.

To settle the matter amicably, Django's brother, Joseph Reinhardt was recruited to play rhythm guitar to complete the Quintette line-up and keep the peace!

The rhythm players plus the bass player must work as a tight knit team in order to support the soloists and drive the music forward. It is essential therefore, that the rhythm guitarists play a solid and steady style, and recordings of the QHCF will demonstrate that there are subtle differences in the playing styles of the two rhythm guitars.

One player will often be heard playing very clipped chords *leger et sec* (light and dry), with virtually no harmonic content and mainly a percussive sound, whilst the other rhythm player will play a more harmonically influenced style using longer sustained chords

The combination of these two styles provides a satisfying balance with the double bass, effectively replacing the drum kit in the ensemble.

9 – Pitfalls for the Rhythm Player

Here are some of the common pitfalls which may trap an aspiring rhythm player and incur the wrath of fellow band members

- Speeding up. It's not a race and soloists do not appreciate accelerando.
- Playing too loud! Always remember it's not a competition and you are not the soloist!
- If you cannot hear the soloist, then you are playing too loud! Remember that playing softly allows greater dynamic range and also encourages the audience to listen rather than chat during a performance
- Playing with a tense wrist. You will quickly tire if you do not play with a relaxed wrist, especially when playing the traditional *La Pompe* style with the rapid up-strokes
- Playing continuous alternate up and down strokes (Shuffle Style) throughout a tune. This will quickly destroy the swing feel of the music
- Gripping the guitar neck too tightly with the fretting hand. Use your fretting hand to release the strings to keep chord sounds short. Half muting means less strain on your fretting hand.
- Allowing open or unwanted strings to ring on. Always mute un-wanted or un-played strings with your fretting hand and remember - *Leger et Sec = Light & Dry*
- Using detached bass notes on beats 1 & 3 when a bass player is present. This is OK when there is no bass player, but you will soon be called to account if you try to duplicate the bass player's role!
- Excessive use of octave runs is frowned upon, since it will detract from the featured soloist's performance. Occasional use is OK on turnarounds, but don't overdo it!
- Gripping the pick too tightly. This will soon result in hand cramps and tiredness
- Playing with an open pick hand. This will also tire you out quickly
- Playing in a very busy style. Over embellishment of the rhythm part is not acceptable and detracts from the solo.
- Losing track of the form
- FINALLY - K. I. S. S. - Keep it simple!

10 – Musical Examples & Tablature

11 - Sources

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- Antoine Boyer (guitar) Masterclass - Grappelli-Django Camp 2017 & 2018, Amersfoort, Netherlands
- Duved Dunayevsky (guitar) Masterclass & one-to-one lessons - March Manouche 2018 & 2019, Menai Bridge
- Angelo Debarre (guitar) Masterclass - March Manouche 2019, Menai Bridge
- Rocky Gresset (guitar) Masterclass – March Manouche 2019, Menai Bridge
- Denis Chang (guitar) Masterclass – March Manouche 2019, Menai Bridge
- Christaan Van Hemert Masterclass – March Manouche 2018, Menai Bridge

12 – Appendix – Gypsy Jazz Guitar Chord Shapes