

PROFILE

Django Reinhardt



Pic: Django Reinhardt

At 13 Django Reinhardt was a wunderkind; aged 18 he lay bedridden, limbs and lower body permanently disabled and at 23 he defied all the odds flourishing under the Nazi laws of occupied France.

The Boy Wonder

Django Reinhardt was born into the French Manouches Gypsy tribe at Liberchies, Belgium, 24 January 1910. Eight years later, his maternal nomadic tribe settled on the outskirts of Paris and remained there as Django found his vocation. Soon after the move, noticing Django's interest in music, a neighbour presented the 9 year old with his first guitar. He carefully watched other guitarists play and after only a few months of self-tutelage he was demonstrating excellence.

Anecdotes concerning Django's dexterity, memory, and musical prowess began to circulate around other gypsy camps and beyond. He seemed able to turn his hand to any style but with a passion for modern dance numbers his playing was most influenced by Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington. At 13 he began playing his first professional gigs at a dance hall on Rue Monge with the popular accordionist Guerino. The Ideal Group and Jean Vaissade offered the affable Django his first recording session, and many other artistes and dance bands followed as news of his skill travelled fast. Those who came into contact became fascinated by him; the legend of the 20th century guitar genius was forming.

Fire Destroys Hope

On 2 November 1928 after a late night concert, the 18 year old Django returned to his caravan to find his wife asleep after having made hundreds of artificial flowers to sell at market the following day. Cigarette in hand, the guitarist mistakenly let hot ash fall onto the highly flammable flowers and their home was immediately engulfed in flames. Though the pair escaped, Django severely burnt his right side from thigh to waist and badly damaged his left hand.

18 months in a nursing home saved his leg from amputation though he was never able to walk easily again. The third and fourth digits on his left hand were permanently curled due to bad tendon damage, seemingly preventing any further musical activity. And yet, a musician himself, Django's younger brother brought a guitar to the hospital to encourage the patient to re-think his technique and relearn. He took up the enormous challenge and though, in tandem with the leg injury, his musical progress was painstakingly slow, he did find a way of incorporating the damaged fingers to play chords or octaves even though full extension and dexterity were impossible.

Stronger Than Ever

His determination to play again, coupled with his unmistakable talent and sparkling personality set the Parisian Jazz and Swing scenes agog. Physical recovery coincided with his meeting one of the first great Jazz violinists backstage at a concert in which both were playing. The bond with Stephan Grappelli, was instantaneous and that trust allowed Reinhardt to apply himself to Jazz and play in a style never heard before. Grappelli took his lead:

DVD

**The White Lament
DVD has audio
recordings of
Django Reinhardt**

MUSIC

● PRELIMINARY RESEARCH

First find out as much as you can about Reinhardt and his music and share it with your colleagues.

Listen to his music featured on the DVD and with a blank piece of paper in front of you, write down any words or draw pictures in response to what you hear.

Starting with the Glossary in the Resource chapter, research the history and culture of Gypsies. What other art did / do they produce or influence? How are gypsies treated today?



Pic: Django Reinhardt, centre, with his band including Stephan Grapelli on the left.

● TRUST IN ME

Django continued to work in Nazi occupied Paris even though he was in danger. It must have taken great trust in the Nazi officer to continue working, when other gypsies and disabled people were being deported to Nazi camps in Eastern Europe.

In an open space, find a partner and blindfold one of the pair. Lead your partner round the room using finger tip contact only. Use variation in speed, height and direction to test your partners trust, whilst always maintaining their safety. Swap roles and then discuss what it felt like.

Now allocate a noise or call (but not a word) that you will lead your partner round the space with. Without any physical contact, use the unique call to guide your partner round other participants in the room.

Join into groups of six and stand in a VERY tight circle facing inwards. Ask for a volunteer to stand in the middle of the circle. (Close all gaps and keep all hands at the ready). The person in the middle shuts their eyes, keeping feet firmly on the ground and in one place. The person in the middle will be physically supported by the other group members as he/she allows him/herself to fall a short way back or fore (keeping a straight body), until their weight is taken by a group member or members. It is best for supporting members to take the weight at the volunteers shoulders or upper back depending on which way they are falling. The group members taking the weight then gently push the volunteer towards another group member across the circle. It should be possible for the volunteer to fall in 360 degrees if the group is working effectively.

As the volunteer gains in confidence the speed of moving them from one side to another can be increased. Ensure the volunteers feet always stay planted on the ground and the body remains straight so as to help the flow of movement between the group members supporting them.

Citizenship Concepts:
research, understanding,
interpretation, listening,
reflection, communication,
meaning.

Citizenship Concepts:
trust, group responsibility,
problem solving, non-verbal
communication,
consequences of actions,
community welfare.

Jazz lovers were rare in Paris at that time. And I had some doubts playing such a modern music on so eminently classical an instrument as the violin. It was Django's faith and Django's genius that blew away my fears.

Quintet of the Hot Club of France

Forming 'The Quintet of the Hot Club of France' with Roger Chaput on guitar, Louis Vola playing bass and Django's brother Joseph also on guitar, they enjoyed popularity within a relatively small scene. They were inundated with bookings for gigs and recording sessions through France and further a field into Europe. With Grappelli as his guide, Django joined the world of eminent artists, writers, poets and musicians of the day: Francis Poulenc, Pierre Reverdy, Robert Goffin and Jean Cocteau amongst others lauded him for many years. Cocteau is quoted as saying: 'this guitar that laughs and weeps, guitar with a human voice'.

Outbreak of War

Undoubtedly it was Reinhardt's talent and reputation that were his salvation from the fates suffered by many of his fellow gypsy folk and others disabled (through birth or accidents) living in Europe at the time of the Third Reich. When war broke out, the Quintet was in Britain; their fame was at an all time high. Reinhardt panicked, leaving the band and his guitar to return home to Paris: 'it's easier to be scared in your own country.'

Other members of the quintet stayed in Britain until France's liberation so Django formed another quintet but this time with clarinet instead of violin, emulating Benny Goodman's model. Though Swing and Jazz were curbed in Germany, occupied France had a little more leeway and by changing names of favourite dance numbers like Saint Louis Blues to La Tristesse de Saint Louis (the sadness of St. Louis) it was possible, to an extent, to disguise the 'imported' music and pass it off as indigenous. As Nazi restrictions increased, fewer tunes from America were available and Django Reinhardt and his new quintet were able to fill the gap. Swing records were selling by the thousand and Django's new Swing numbers brought fresh vital material to the now widespread popular, escapist scene. They were stars and received the appropriate treatment.

Nazi Threat and Protection!

Nazi officers still held ultimate power in France and policies of the Fatherland were to be expressly upheld. Musicians, writers and thinkers were punished and did disappear never to be seen again because of their allegiance to banned 'degenerate' art or artists; these of course included figures from the Swing and Jazz scene.

Such a prominent figure as Django Reinhardt could not have gone unnoticed. The quintet's popular concerts went unhindered because of the protection of German Officer Luftwaffe Oberleutenant Dietrich Schulz-Koehn. He was a passionate Jazz fan, a follower of the Berlin club scene, especially keen on Benny Goodman and pretty taken with Django Reinhardt. Though little else is known of him Dietrich risked his own reputation and safety to enable Django to continue working. Django also learnt to keep his head down in times of trouble and took off on tours of France to ease things along but it was Dietrich who saved Reinhardt from deportation to a concentration or extermination camp where so many of his fellow musicians, gypsies or disabled were incarcerated.

● STORY IN THE MUSIC

Source more recordings of Django's music.

Listen carefully to the music you have found and respond onto A4 paper either with key words, phrases or pictures. Is there a story within the music? Share your responses in sub-groups and identify similarities and differences in your interpretation of the music.

Choreograph a sequence of dance moves to tell the story along with the music. Add costumes and props then perform your dance-stories to other sub-groups.

Citizenship Concepts:
research, independent thought, responding to social environment, cultural rights, consultation, decision making.

● DJANGO'S DIARY ENTRY

Imagine you are Django writing a diary entry at the end of a fantastic night playing jazz in a club till the early hours of the morning. The audience appreciated your talents more than ever but you know there were Nazi officers at the club watching you. You are well aware Jazz is officially termed 'degenerate' by the Nazis and should not be played. You know you are risking your life by continuing to play. How do you feel about being protected by Dietrich the Nazi officer?

Begin your diary entry with 'I love playing jazz but...'

See Cast Creative writing in the Resource chapter for examples of work from students.



Pic: Django on the left of the picture alongside a German officer and other musicians outside 'La Cigale' in occupied Paris. Photo by Luftwaffe Oberleutnant Dietrich Schulz-Koehn.

Citizenship Concepts:
communication, cultural diversity, prejudice, discrimination, protection, cooperation, difference between needs of society, government and the individual.

● LIFE ON THE LINE

'protection': How easy would it have been for Dietrich to protect Django? Discuss this situation

● 'SWEET AND LOWDOWN'

Watch the film 'Sweet and Lowdown' about a fictitious jazz guitarist who was working at the same time as Django Reinhardt and idolised him.

Citizenship Concepts:
cultural diversity, self-expression, rights, discrimination, pre-judice, inclusivity, identity, communication.

● ARTISTS' BRAVERY

Django put his life at risk trusting in the Nazi officer. Who else do you know of that has risked their life for Art?