

AN ESSAY

La Pompe

*On Django Reinhardt, a room full of
gray hair, and where the beat went.*

BY CHRIS WYATT · A SEVEN-MINUTE READ

SATURDAY NIGHT IN ANN ARBOR, AND THE HALL IS FULL of gray.

The band on stage is playing Django Reinhardt. The tunes he wrote. The tunes he took. The hot swing he made in Paris in the 1930s, with a violin, a bass, and three guitars.

Django died at Fontainebleau in 1953. He was forty-three. Nobody on that stage ever met him. Almost nobody in these seats is old enough to remember him. The songs are older than everyone in the building, and when the singer stands up for the old ones, they are older still.

I should say up front that I love this music more than I can account for. I have no Paris in my past. No caravan. No 1937. Neither does anyone else in the room. And yet here we all are, on a Saturday night, for a guitarist born in a Belgian caravan in 1910, whom most of the country could not name.

Whatever this is, it is not nostalgia. Nobody in this room is remembering anything.

That turns out to be the point.

The band is good. Not good for a tribute. Good. The music comes off the stage intact, fast and bright and swinging, and for two hours the room has no excuse.

What the room is doing is sitting.

Upright. Polite. Quiet. No one stands. Between songs the applause is warm and finite. It starts together. It stops together. Then the room is silent again. Waiting. Like a congregation.

I am among the younger people here, which I mention because it will not be true much longer. The younger man I used to be had a phrase for a room like this.

He would have called it dead.

Then I see the knee.

Two seats down, a man in a sweater, with a face like a closed door. And below the armrest, out of his own line of sight, his right knee, going like a sewing machine.

Once you see one, you see them all. A foot in the aisle. A head one row ahead, nodding half a beat before the melody turns, because it knows the tune. Shoulders. A hand on a thigh, the fingers working.

Nobody is dancing. The whole room is moving. And it is doing it in a range of motion you could fit inside a shoebox.

+ + +

Here is how this music works.

Django's original band, the Quintette du Hot Club de France, had no drums. The beat came from two rhythm guitars playing a hard, chopped, percussive stroke on every quarter note. The players call it *la pompe*. The pump. It is a relentless thing, and it is the whole floor of the music. Everything Django did, he did against that pump: the runs, the octaves, the lines that leave early and land late.

Swing is not a rhythm. It is a relationship. A steady pulse, and something leaning on it. Take away the pulse, and the lean has nothing to lean on.

In Paris, the pulse was not only in the guitars. This was dance music, played in cafés and dance halls for people on their feet. The floor kept time. The band leaned on the floor.

Now put the same music in a concert hall in Michigan, ninety years later. Everyone seated. Lights down. The pump is still there on stage, but the floor is gone. Nobody is on their feet to hold up the bottom of the music. So the pulse does what a pulse does when its usual body is taken away.

It finds another one.

It goes into the knees.

Watch the room with that in mind, and it reorganizes itself. A few hundred knees on the quarter note. A foot on the two and the four. The band is playing the melody, the syncopation, the lean. The room is playing *la pompe*.

It is not an audience. It is the rhythm section. And it is sitting down.

+ + +

A wave has two things you can measure.

Frequency is *what* it is. The pitch. The note. The identity. Amplitude is *how big* it is. The loudness. The height. The swing. You can turn a wave down almost to nothing, and it remains exactly the same wave.

Volume is not content.

This music has been turned down for ninety years. From the dance floor to the record to the concert hall. From standing to seated. From Paris to Ann Arbor. At every step the amplitude dropped. Fewer people on their feet. Less noise. More chairs. And at every step, the frequency held.

The swing that put a room in Paris on its feet in 1937 is the swing moving a knee in row M tonight. At a fraction of the volume. And exactly the same pitch.

That is the test of a tradition. Not that it stays loud. That it stays in tune, at any volume.

+ + +

Django knew something about range of motion.

At eighteen, a fire in his caravan cost him the use of two fingers on his fretting hand. The ring finger and the little finger curled, and stayed. He was told he would not play again. He rebuilt his entire technique around the two good fingers he had left, and the style that came out of that hand is the style every player on that stage learned: the chromatic runs, the octave lines, the spare, strange chords.

The most influential guitar sound Europe ever produced came out of a hand with a reduced range of motion. The constraint did not dilute the music. It concentrated it.

So when I say the room is moving in a range of motion you could fit inside a shoebox, I mean it as the highest compliment I have.

Django played with two fingers. The room is listening with one knee. It is enough. In this music, it has always been enough.

+ + +

And here is the part I did not expect.

The quiet room is the only room where love is legible.

Where this music started, everyone was loud. And loud is illegible. When everyone is loud, you cannot tell who means it. Some are there for their friends. Some because it is Saturday. Some to be seen. The noise makes one sound, and it tells you nothing about any single person inside it.

Love in a loud room is a statistic.

In a seated room, the smallest motion is a confession. That knee is not a performance. It is not for the band, who cannot see it. Not for the neighbors, who are not looking. Not for the man himself, who does not know it is going. It is happening anyway, and the only reason left for it to happen is that it is true.

Restraint does not hide feeling. It isolates it. The politeness of the room is not the absence of the thing I came to see. It is the instrument that lets me see it.

+ + +

Now the part I have been circling.

We say a night like this is about remembering him, and the word is wrong. Nobody in the building has a memory of Django Reinhardt. What we have instead is stranger, and more durable, than memory.

Django could not read music. He learned by ear, in a caravan, from people who learned by ear. After he died, the music went back where it came from: to the Manouche families around Paris, and to Samois-sur-Seine, the river town where he is buried and where players still gather every June. It was passed along the only way it has ever been passed. Hand to hand. Ear to ear. Nobody writing it down.

Ninety years of hands. The band on stage is the newest pair. The knees in the room are the newest set of ears.

That is what a tradition is: a thing that does not need anyone to have been there. Memory dies with the people who hold it. This does not, because it was never stored in anyone's past. It was stored in the hands, and the hands keep getting replaced.

When the singer takes the old songs, the ones from before the war, the knees do not slow down. Nobody needs the words. The words were never where it lived.

Those people are not remembering him.

They are where he is.

Look at any one of them and you see the same shape. Above the belt, a concert hall. Still. Upright. Attentive. Grateful. Below the belt, a dance hall in Paris in 1937. Every body in the room is in two venues at once, and every body has solved the problem the same way. At the waist. Without conferring.

I said this was not nostalgia, and I meant it. Nostalgia wants something back. Nobody here wants 1937 back. Nobody here had it. What is in the room is simpler and better than that: a music built to be leaned on, and a room that, without being asked, is holding up the bottom of it.

Two seats down, a knee is keeping quarter notes for a man who died in 1953, in a rhythm invented in a city its owner may never have seen. It has been doing this for two hours. It is not tired.

The band plays the tune. The room keeps the beat. That is how it went in Paris, and that is how it goes tonight.

The dance did not stop.

It sat down. ♦

A NOTE ON THE READING. For Django's life, from the caravan at Liberchies to the fire of 1928, see Michael Dregni, *Django: The Life and Music of a Gypsy Legend* (2004). The drumless band described here is the prewar Quintette du Hot Club de France. Django added a drummer in the 1940s. The festival in his name has been held every June since 1983. It began in Samois-sur-Seine, and its main stage now sits in the château park at Fontainebleau.