

Django John

FROM HELLECASTING, TO NASHVILLE TO... GYPSY JAZZ? MICK TAYLOR MEETS JOHN JORGENSEN TO TALK SIGNATURE GUITARS, MAJOR-LEAGUE MOVIES AND THE GREATEST TWO-FINGERED GUITAR PLAYER THAT EVER LIVED



... He's been a Desert Rose and he's achieved twang-bangin' infamy with The Hellecasters. He toured with Elton John, and he's currently all over the top country music coming out of Nashville, yet ask John Jorgensen what music he loves to play most, and you'll get a somewhat surprising answer.

"Throughout the years since the early 1980s," he explains, "for my own enjoyment I would always work on Django music. I'd play whenever I could, go to the festival in France, study, and of course get the guitars."

'Django music' as he fondly describes it, is the Gypsy Jazz style that became popular in mid-1930s Paris. Its two most celebrated protagonists are Stephane Grappelli (violin) and Django Reinhardt (guitar), both virtuoso players who featured in The Quintet of the Hot Club of France. To this day they are revered and indeed imitated – not least by Jorgensen as it turns out.

TWO FINGERS

Django Reinhardt's music and the Gypsy Jazz style is enjoying its biggest surge in popularity since it first appeared. With 'DjangoFests' springing

up all over the world, Jorgensen has at last arrived at a point where he can bring his years of tireless study to a wide audience. There's a signature guitar, signature strings and a new CD in the pipeline, not to mention a major film release starring 2003 Oscar winner Charlize Theron and the equally lovely Penelope Cruz. Called *Head In The Clouds*, John takes up the story.

"A year ago in January I was in Italy playing some gigs, and I got an email from a guy who was music supervisor on a film, because the director wanted to use two of the classic Quintet tracks.


"He didn't feel like those original recordings would sound right with newly recorded dialogue and so forth – it was supposed to be taking place present day in 1936 – so he started looking for somebody to copy the music exactly. He submitted a few people and the director was like, 'No, that doesn't sound right...' So finally he became frustrated and went to *Guitar Player* magazine, and they recommended me.

"Until that point I'd never done anything to directly copy a Django record, but I said I'd be up for the challenge. So he sent the music to the

director and the director liked it. I spoke with him and I was trying to make sure he didn't think that I was the kind of trainspotting, psychotic Django freak that I am, ha! So we talked for a bit and he says 'Well you're the right guy to do it, and there's also a part of Django on camera.'

"I said, 'Wow, you gotta' let me do that! I don't look anything like Django, but I'll cut my hair, I'll die it, I'll grow the moustache – whatever.' And he says, 'Well okay. We'll have to get prosthetics to do something special for your hand' [Reinhardt's left-hand ring and little fingers were unusable after burns from a house fire].

"I was like, 'Yeah that would be cool!' So he replied 'No, no I was just kidding – how could you play?' And I said 'Well, I learned it all with two fingers anyway!'

"I didn't do that originally just for the purposes of slavish imitation, but just to figure out what made those sounds. The licks are so odd; they're so unusual and there's such a particular sound to the way he plays. I figured that, well, if he just used two fingers then he's going to be playing these runs in particular places." 

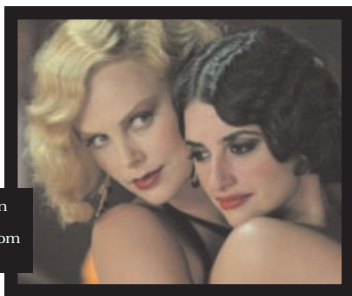
CAUGHT ON CAMERA

Jorgenson appears in the movie as Django, and contributed two tracks; 'Blue Drag' and 'Minor Swing'. However, the story does not centre specifically around Reinhardt, as John



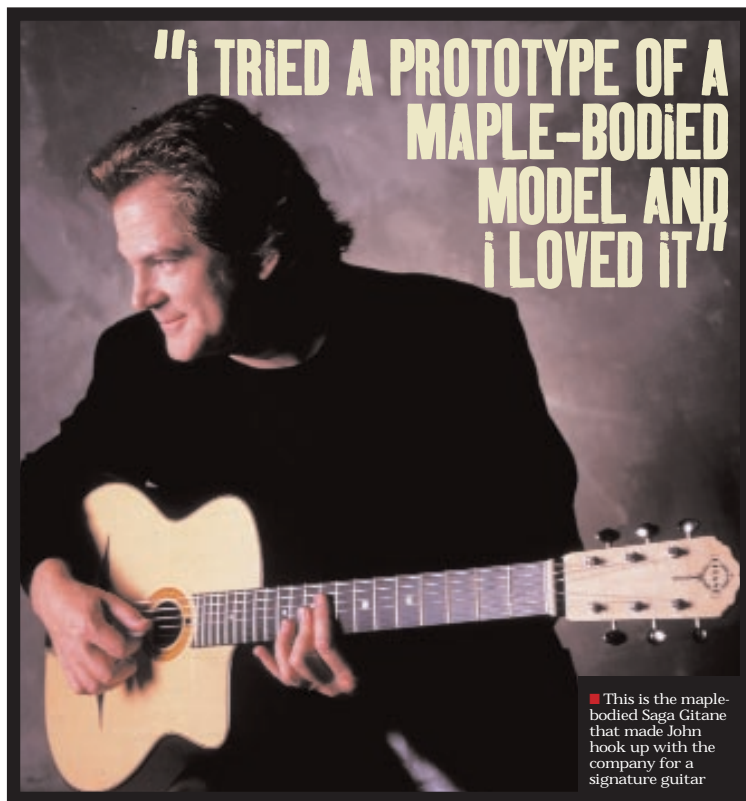
■ The Quintet 2004: Andy Mackenzie (L), John and Francois Rousseau (R) on guitar, while the bassist and violinist are extras

explains. "Well, I guess it's sort of an epic; a historic/romantic thing. And when we're playing 'Blue Drag' the two women dance together... which is kind of a good scene! Django's just really part of the scene. It takes place in Paris in the 1930s and Charlize Theron is a photographer in Paris. Penelope Cruz is a political refugee and Stuart Townshend is the student, and they all hook up in a kinda' love triangle thing. From the snippets I've seen it looks just great. It's coming out 17 September in the US and the premiere is going to be at the Toronto Film Festival and I get to go and do the whole red carpet thing and everything!



■ For all the info on the new movie, see www.sonyclassics.com/headintheclouds

IMAGE: PIERRE DURIY



■ This is the maple-bodied Saga Gitane that made John hook up with the company for a signature guitar

IMAGE: JIM MCGUIRE

HANKOLOGY

To coincide with the movie's release, Jorgenson has also released a CD, inspired by his trips to France and his long-standing love of this music.

"The new CD is loosely connected with the film," admits John, keen to take advantage of the wider press coverage, "although it's something I've been working on for a while. In fact, I did another album of that style back in 1986 which I guess was my first solo album. I've included the songs from the film as bonus tracks because they're just dead-on copies as best I can do. I wouldn't consider that as 'my' music, but I thought it'd be fun for people to hear. Then the rest of the music, most of it I wrote myself. Some traditional Musette Waltzes, some swing numbers and a ballad that I'd written for Danny Gotton the morning that I heard about his suicide. It's a tribute to him but it's in the Django style – that's just the way it came out."

One of the songs that Jorgenson did not write is 'Man Of Mystery', made famous by our very own Hank Marvin. Turns out that Hank is something of a serious Django fan, too...

"Through meeting Hank and hanging out with him," enthuses John, "I

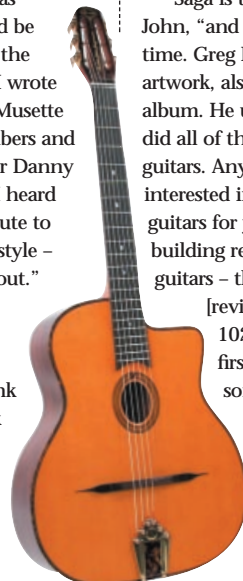
found out what a massive Gypsy Jazz fan he is. I thought it'd be fun to do one of his songs in that style. He's heard it and he really likes it – I did it as if Stochelo Rosenberg was doing it!"

WHAT A SAGA

To complete the full Gypsy Jazz get-up, Jorgenson of course needs the right guitar. He has a genuine 1940s Selmer which you can read about below, and has also been associated with Dupont guitars. However, there's never been an official Selmer-style Jorgenson signature guitar until now.

"Saga is the company," explains John, "and I've known them for a long time. Greg Rich who does all their artwork, also did the artwork on my album. He used to work at Gibson and did all of those fancy pearl-inlay guitars. Anyway, he's always been interested in Django and Selmer-style guitars for years. Now Saga has started building really nice Selmer-style guitars – the line is called Gitane

[reviewed this month on page 102]. I was a little suspicious at first because they had made some pretty bad ones back along, and I thought that maybe it's just not



■ John's new Saga DG-300. It'll retail for \$1395 in the US; UK tbc



STRUNG UP

JOHN JORGENSON STRINGS FROM DELL ARTE

■ As you can imagine, a very specific guitar with a specific sound requires specific strings. So John has teamed up with Dell Arte to produce a custom gauge set.

"They're silver-plated copper-wound," explains John, "and that's the type that's traditionally used for gypsy jazz. In fact, some people think they're silk and steel because they kinda' have that sound. The copper is very flexible so you wear through them quickly, but the tone

is worth it. The top E is a 10, in fact it's almost like an electric gauge set, but when you put it on that long scale and you have a decent action, it really will bark out. Some guitars seem to like a little heavier gauge strings, and some don't – but for starters we have the 10 set."



WHERE TO START?
YOUR GYPSY JAZZ LISTENING GUIDE

■ We asked John to recommend a good place to start for anyone wanting to get into Django Reinhardt's music. Here's what he said...

"There are three brilliant five-CD Django box sets by JSP. Particularly *The Early Chronological Recordings and Paris and London 1937-40*. They are all good, with nice remastering too. Bireli Lagrene's *Gypsy Project* CD is also fantastic.

"The Stephane Grappelli *Life In The Jazz Century* DVD has all the known footage of Django, plus wonderful music from Stephane with George Shearing and others.

"Romane's *Samois Sur Siene* and Jimmy Rosenberg's *Sinti* are two others that got lots of time in my CD player:

"In fact, pretty much anything by Django is well worth checking out! There's also a double CD called *Gypsy Jazz School: Django's Legacy* that has cuts by many of the different players over the years, and gives a good intro to the school of playing that Django started."

■ All of the above releases are available at www.amazon.co.uk



■ John with his 1942 Selmer guitar bought for \$2200 in 1982

possible to make an affordable version; maybe it's too complex.

"But then I tried one of their guitars at the Frankfurt show, a prototype of a maple-bodied model and I loved it. The consistency is good so I said I'd be really into doing a signature model.

"It was just released at the NAMM show in July and I did a gig to unveil it. It's a 14-fret oval-hole model with slotted headstock, Brazilian rosewood veneer on the back and sides and I had the inside varnished and the braces made thinner. The finish on the outside, I got 'em just to do it as thin as possible, and then I did a few cosmetic touches like tortoiseshell binding and the tailpiece insert and a little thing on the rosette, higher quality tuners and so on. I've loved this music for so long and to get all of my favourite features on one guitar is so great."

SWEET SELMER

As well as his new signature model, Jorgenson has also managed to acquire a couple of original Selmer guitars – as rare and desirable as any Fender,

Gibson or Martin among guitar collectors. Could his 14-fretter have once been owned by Django himself?

"In the early 1980s I bought an original Selmer, 14-fret, oval-hole model. It had got to America via a guy named Moustache, a French jazz drummer and a personality, an actor. Apparently he was buddies with Django and legend has it that he was given this guitar by Django in lieu of some money he owed him.

"Who knows if that's true, but he did bring it to Westwood Music in the 1970s and sold it to Fred Walecki, the owner. Westwood is the place in LA where all the folk and folk/rock people – Crosby Stills & Nash, Joni Mitchell, Jackson Browne – would get their Martins. And this guitar sat there in the back for years until one of my friends told me about it. I was like 'Oh it can't still be there?,' and he said, 'Yeah it is, 'cos you have to ask for it.'

"I was working at Disneyland at the time, playing, and I went to the Credit Union on my lunch hour and got a loan, called up the store and said 'Stay open on Friday afternoon, I'm driving from Anaheim, and I want that guitar!' The most I'd paid for any instrument was \$1900 for a Gibson F-5 mandolin, and this was \$2200, so it was the most expensive instrument I'd ever bought. And nowadays \$20,000 is the normal price. But it sure seemed a lot at the time!"

Most people have barely seen an original Selmer, let alone played one.



■ John's new album Franco-American Swing is out now

What are they like to play?

"The 14-fret model has a longer scale length than a Strat, so there's a lot of tension on the strings and the necks are very thick. They're kind of a beast, but they sound great. I guess it's a very physical, callanetic type of guitar playing – not for the faint of heart!

"The 12-fret models have a shorter scale so they're more friendly to the left hand. I've ended up getting a 12-fret Selmer model over the years, as well, and also a Dupont which was sort of an unofficial model that started to get called 'the John Jorgenson model' because it was an unusual set of features. It had a 14-fret neck with a D soundhole and the sound chamber inside as well. It's an extra box inside of the soundbox – most people aren't so crazy about 'em. It makes the guitar quieter; actually, what it does is that it makes the guitar more even, almost more compressed. Some of the very first Selmer Maccaferri were done like that, then Mario Maccaferri had an argument with Selmer and left the company and they stopped making that soundbox and eventually drifted to the oval-hole model. There were less than 1000 of those guitars built; of all the models including Hawaiians, Classics, four strings."

ON THE UP

With the film, the new album, the signature guitar and also a new set of John Jorgenson strings from Dell Arte, interest in Hot Club/Django-type music seems to be at an all-time high for Jorgenson at least. And what of the wider world?

"In America, the interest in Django is really getting bigger. In October alone I'm playing three Django festivals! Thanks to the Internet, people are able to find out that they're not the only ones into it, and also affordable guitars like the Sagas help, too. And films such as Woody Allen's *Sweet And Lowdown* (1999, starring Sean Penn), and of course *Head In The Clouds* (2004). It's great that it's all happening!" **GB**

■ For everything Jorgenson-related, see www.johnjorgenson.com

IMAGE: RUSTY RUSSELL

QUECUMBAR

LONDON HAS A DEDICATED PARISIAN SWING VENUE

■ On 26 September, John is heading to London to play at Le QuecumBar & Brasserie.

"It's a fairly new venue, that's devoted to Hot Club and Gypsy Jazz/Swing music. They put on world-class players, and also local musicians are playing there as

well. It's so cool to have a venue devoted to that – I was the first US patron of the club."

You can find Le QuecumBar at 42-44 Battersea High Street, London SW11 3HX. See www.quecumbar.co.uk or call 020 7787 2227 for enquiries.