

le hot

**the assimilation
of american jazz
in france, 1917-1940**

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The assimilation of American jazz music in France, an instance of the cultural transmission of an emerging American musical art, began at the time of World War I. Within the subsequent history of jazz in France lies the tale of the progressive mastery of the two principles of improvisation and rhythmic swing and the modification of American sounds to suit the particular cultural terrain of France between the two World Wars. The process was eased by the obvious fact that France already contained, indeed originated in some cases, the basics of western music: instrumental definitions, chromatic and diatonic scales and the myriad chords from which they were constructed. Still, the principles of melodic and particularly harmonic improvisation were little known in France as was the surprising phenomenon of rhythmic swing so that when early jazz arrived in that country French musicians knew most of the vocabulary of jazz without knowing how to make jazz statements. A small number of French musicians learned to “sing” with a swing and in the process created their own “*école française de jazz*.”

Ragtime and the musical precursors of jazz were carried from the U.S.A. to France by military bands sent by the American government in 1917. The most famous was the 369th Infantry Regiment’s Hell Fighters Band, an all-Black outfit organized and led by James Reese Europe. Europe was a pioneer of ragtime in New York City where he had organized

concerts of Black music, headed the famous Clef Club, and accompanied Irene and Vernon Castle's introduction of the foxtrot in America. Europe's band played straight march music, so important to French musical history, but also performed such pieces as the *Memphis Blues* "with the wild abandon of the early New Orleans marching bands." The legendary Bill "Bojangles" Robinson was the drum major of Europe's group which injected "wildly impetuous" breaks into their normal brass band numbers.¹

More directly influential were Mitchell's Jazz Kings who arrived from America as early as 1917 and took up residence at the *Perroquet*, a cabaret in the basement of the Casino of Paris. Led by Louis Mitchell, a drummer, the Jazz Kings spent six years in Paris where they deeply influenced Parisian musicians. The all-Black group recorded a good deal for Pathé in Paris and produced a few syncopated "raggy" numbers in a repertory of marches and light concert pieces. Still, several *avant garde* French musicians listened with wonder to the improvisations which the bandsmen injected into their written arrangements.²

Mitchell's Jazz Kings and most of the early American groups played for the wealthy set on the right bank of the Seine. The post-war years brought a thirst for entertainment and Parisian high society was amused by things Black and Exotic. Many Black American soldiers, out-patients at the American Hospital in Neuilly, entertained in cafés and spread the idea of Black American nightclub entertainment. The growth of appreciation for Black music as an art form grew quite slowly thereafter and this kind of music appealed only to a very tiny minority of French people before World War II. Throughout the 1920s there were black and white American musicians playing swinging music in Paris but it was not until the early 1930s that real evidence appeared of a well-rooted French jazz community of French musicians, fans (*les mordus*) and jazz writers.

French documents on jazz from 1917 to 1940 indicate that the term "Jazz," much as in the United States, took time to acquire definition. The initial meanings given to the word stressed various facets of what were more properly visual than aural phenomena. After the war, American musicians arrived in France with all-Black stage shows from Broadway, playing either on stage or in the pit bands. The *Revue Nègre* opened at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées in the fall of 1925 and was followed by *Blackbirds of 1926* and *Blackbirds of 1928*. Such famous jazz musicians as Sidney Bechet, Tommy Ladnier, Arthur Briggs, Claude Hopkins and Doc Cheatham played for these shows which featured the dancing of such great stars as John Bubbles and Josephine Baker. This led French people to associate jazz with dancing and theatrical productions, not incorrect notions but ones which diverted attention from the music to the dancing and the setting. Wherever Black entertainers danced in theaters, "le Music Hall" and cabarets, French audiences called it "un jazz."³

A similar sort of confusion surrounded the American introductions of the drums-set: France had never seen our "drummer's traps" (snare drum, bass drum, tom-toms, cymbals, wood blocks and other equipment

stationed so that one man may play them all) until World War I and when Bennie Payton's band and Mitchell's Jazz Kings introduced this innovation while touring postwar Europe public attention fixed upon the drums which were labeled "un jazz."

So, near the end of 1918 the Casino of Paris reopened with Murray Pilcer's Orchestra which played a dance which was a revelation for Parisians who were eager for novelty. It is too bad that the jazz by Pilcer was not a "hot" jazz and that the drums, probably for scenic effect, played an unduly important part in the show. The audience's attention was completely drawn to this drum set surrounded by bells, horns, toy pistols, tambourines, etc. and the people immediately confused the name of the orchestra with the drums. Many people still think that the term "jazz" applies only to the drums.⁴

In correcting this error, the writer made another in using the word to describe the orchestra and not the music which they played. American dance steps were the rage and French youth learned the Tango and "Le Jazz."

The popular acceptance of improvised jazz music, quite apart from the associated dancing, was encouraged by the early adoption of the orchestral or "symphonic" approach made famous in America by Paul Whiteman. Played by big bands of at least twelve pieces playing heavily arranged songs, this compromise between improvisation and traditional written music provided a bridge between French musical tradition and jazz. Brought to France by nearly all the early orchestras but made famous there by the English bandleader Jack Hylton, this formula was adopted by "Gregor and His Gregorians" and Ray Ventura who played the theaters, casinos and cabarets in Paris and on the Côte d'Azur.⁵

In this regard, it is remarkable, given the imperial history of France in North America and musical developments in France after World War II, that the classic New Orleans style of Joseph "King" Oliver's Creole Jazz Band had little impact in France before World War II. Whatever cultural connections have been mentioned between French colonial culture and early New Orleans jazz, it was not to that genre that French musicians turned between the two wars. Like the country as a whole, French musicians were exposed to the versions of early jazz which emanated from the major east coast cities of the U.S.A., a music which was technically sophisticated and highly arranged.⁶

The large, arranged ensemble formula of America's east coast cities was important in promoting the assimilation of jazz in France. Inevitably, French musicians were strong music readers having frequently followed rigorous courses in music reading at the Conservatoire National. They read slickly jazzy charts (*partitions*) with precision and even injected short solo statements into the web of commercial arrangements. Exposure to the core paradigm of jazz—improvised performance based on underlying harmonic structure—would have been too radical at this time, both for the musicians and the public.

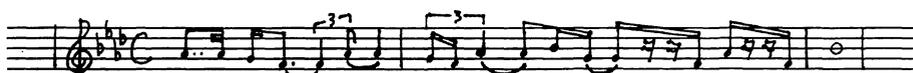


Guarding against the heritage of European rhythmic training, Mougín underlined the need to play his melodic alternatives exactly as written in order to break old habits. “The value of the notes must be mathematical.” Later, when French musicians had the “feel” for American swing they could rely upon their rhythmic instincts but at first they had to concentrate on breaking habits not suited to jazz expression.

For example, Mougín noted that faced with a transcription such as the following, French musicians, unable to free themselves of the influence of polkas, quick-steps “or other inconsequential music” would tend toward certain representative errors. Instead of a rhythmically balanced



the inexperienced French musician would tend to play:



Admitting that he exaggerated to make his point, Mougín was visualizing the tendency for beginning improvisers to “stutter” their notes, lunging about jerkily in search of something to play before the time should run out. His call for melodic modifications which possessed a mathematical uniformity and rhythmic equality were antidotes to the nervous stammerings of beginning improvisers.

Inevitably it took time for new skills to be learned and “jazz did not evolve much in France before 1926.” Any orchestra which featured a banjo and or the drums was called a “jazzband” but their repertoires remained much as before, foxtrots played as written and without improvisation. French orchestra leaders wrote little works like “Intermezzo Américain” based on ragtime or jazz ideas but “their possibilities of adapting to jazz remained very limited.”

Even the great, pioneering Black orchestras which played in Paris retained the commercial, highly arranged sound throughout the 1920s. Noble Sissle, who had first gone to France with Jim Europe, hired such great soloists as clarinetist Buster Bailey and multi-instrumentalist Juice Wilson but when performing in the *boîtes* of the Champs Elysées, his band offered smoothly arranged American corn featuring joyous vocals on the pleasures of *Campmeeting Day* when happy Blacks sang and danced the day away. These bands played for floorshows, dressed in impeccably tailored uniforms and lightened the jazz burden with generous amounts of good natured clowning. The occasional solo statement might go nearly unnoticed under all that camouflage. Gregor and Ray Ventura were quick to adopt the formula, recording *Happy Days Are Here Again* and *Irma Mae*, the latter complete with amusing English-language vocal.

To increase the assimilation of jazz the first French jazz magazine *La Revue du Jazz*,⁷ the “house-organ” of Gregor and His Gregorians first

appeared in 1929 and printed instrumental solo variations on popular songs of the day, carefully transcribed so that the professional danceband musician might burst forth with the studied eloquence of Bix Beiderbecke. Such brief, one chorus solos were called “un hot” or “un Hot chorus” and sometimes, revealingly, “le Hot (Dirt) Chorus.” Actual solo flights of improvisation might echo Mougin’s example if a young French musician allowed enthusiasm to outrun discretion. It was safer musically to stick to written notes. As one article claimed, not even the great American masters like Bix and Joe Venuti would *dare* improvise into a microphone! French musicians should play their arrangements “. . . with the fewest possible changes, paying close attention to slurs and accents, etc. . . .”⁸ The second French jazz magazine *Jazz-Tango*, written for professional danceband musicians, provided strict instructions on the exact instruments to be used depending upon how many musicians had been hired for a job. While praising French musicians for their superior musicianship, the magazine counseled against using oboes and bassoons.

The third major factor in the origins of jazz in France was the phonograph record. Even though no more than one hundred copies of each American jazz record were pressed in France, the early phonograph records were influential since they were the surest means of really learning to play a new jazz tune. The young French musician might come away from a cabaret performance deeply impressed by an American band, but with a record he could replay a number repeatedly to learn how it was put together harmonically. Most of the early jazz records in France were issued by the French affiliates of the major American recording companies which promoted commercialized jazz by white orchestras. French listeners would have believed jazz to be a white man’s music given the records by Red Nichols, Miff Mole, Bix Beiderbecke, Jimmy McPartland and Jimmy Dorsey which were released before those by the Black jazz pioneers. It was only in 1929 that Odéon offered the first Louis Armstrong records for sale in France.⁹ This transatlantic extension of American racism had important consequences for the subsequent history of jazz in France and it did serve to ease the cultural conflicts for a French public raised on arranged music. When Hugues Panassié, soon to become the leading French jazz critic, first heard the uncompromising solo improvisations of Louis Armstrong and the McKenzie-Condon Chicagoans, the cultural gap with French musical tradition was too great:

I did not understand a thing of the first record which was too different from what I was used to hearing, and the second one seemed formless. It took one or two months to get up to date.

. . . to understand a genius as exceptional as Louis Armstrong, one must abandon all preconceived ideas, the prejudices learned during a musical education which has its good sides, certainly, but which can’t really help when it comes to judging musicians of another race whose art is entirely developed at the margin of our musical education.¹⁰

It may be noted that Panassié, like the public, had little if any formal musical education.

By the very early 1930s, nonetheless, thanks to Black American performers, white “symphonic” jazz à la Whiteman and jazz records, a small band of French musicians had learned the jazz language and became the core of an emerging French jazz scene. As might be expected, many had conservatory training, often on a stringed instrument before hearing jazz and adopting a wind instrument. Léo Vauchant, trombonist and arranger, expatriated to America in 1931 where he pursued a brilliant career as Leo Arnaud, Musical Director of the Metro Goldwyn Mayer Studios.¹¹ Stéphane Mougin was a pianist who was denied the first prize at the *Conservatoire National* “. . . because it was known that he also played jazz and they didn’t want to give the first prize to a jazz musician.”¹² Trumpeter Philippe Brun began on the violin at the conservatory.¹³ André Ekyan became one of France’s finest soloists on the alto saxophone.¹⁴ Christian Wagner pioneered the tenor saxophone in France and even taught Hugues Panassié for a time.¹⁵ Maurice Chaillou learned jazz drumming from Chicagoan Dave Tough.¹⁶ These and other French jazz players spoke well of Alex Renard, Pierre Allier, Roger Fisbach, Guy Paquinet, Jacquemont Brown, Coco Kiehn, Noel Chiboust and Aimée Barelli.¹⁷ This first generation of French jazz musicians was heavily influenced by white American music and was listening closely to the latest sounds to cross the Atlantic. They were a zealous *avant garde* and gathered in musicians’ hangouts like the Tabac Pigalle.

We were all young neophytes of a barely born art which was considered by everybody as music of a questionable sort. We could all play any music, in vulgar environments, always stumbling in our search for the most authentic form of this new language, but obsessed, constantly tormented by the creative demon, and irresistibly magnetized by a music in which we could foresee and feel an emotional quality never expressed before.¹⁸

Léo Vauchant recalled:

We hung out only with other jazz musicians. We were snobs and respected only those who understood jazz and *avant garde* art. The elite came to hear us: the Duke of Windsor, Alphonse XIII of Spain, Carol of Romania, the Dolly Sisters, Elsa Maxwell, Maurice Chevalier, etc. However, we made a strange click . . . wastrels, bachelors, separateds. We were living in hotels with bad reputations. We had only two suits but each of us had a car and lived in Tuxedos.¹⁹

That first generation felt acutely its lack of experience in a foreign mode of expression and was constantly reminded of it by popular and conservatory prejudice against jazz, by the small number and high price of jazz records and by the excited discovery of some American jazzman briefly playing in Paris. As they mastered their craft, they were drawn together as a self-conscious group of French jazzmen since there were always many Americans hired in Parisian clubs as “Stars” whether or not they played as well as they should.

One aspect of France's adoption of jazz caused some awkwardness: a postwar wave of Negrophilia swept intellectual and artistic circles with stereotypes about jazz and race. Negritude was in fashion, a foreign echo of the Harlem scene between the wars. Black American veterans and musicians were happy to perform in Paris, enjoying an enhanced social status. Most of them did not expatriate to France nor did they become recognized jazz artists in following years and some French musicians felt that they played poorly. Of course, no questions were ever raised about Arthur Briggs, Freddie Johnson, Freddie Taylor or others who were obviously in earnest about both France and music. They, like Bill Coleman, Benny Carter and Sidney Bechet at a later time, assimilated much from French life and, in turn, taught French musicians much about the jazz art. Still, for a group of as yet unproven French jazzmen, the tendency of club owners to present only black American jazzmen spelled trouble.

They nevertheless persisted in their desire to master the jazz art and during the late twenties and early thirties began to fear that they would never be considered as more than pale imitators of a foreign art. Certainly, the café owners, catering to popular taste, hired black Americans over whites for "jazzy" entertainment. After the Wall Street "krach" of 1929, this began to do economic damage to struggling French danceband musicians. Stéphane Mougin insisted that "no one more than I admires certain prodigees with black skin" but he decried a shallow "Négromanie" which fostered racial posturing over good music in the "boîtes de Montmartre, de Montparnasse."²⁰ One of the French contributions to jazz has been a particularly strong emphasis on its black origins and performers, but this did pose a dilemma for those French musicians who liked jazz music enough to learn to play it professionally. The problem was temporary and probably never existed among the best musicians of whatever color. Ultimately the French musicians' union obliged the government to decree that no more than 30 percent of the musicians working in France be foreigners and that a fixed percentage of any working band be French.²¹ This was a far more liberal solution, given the depression economy, than that fashioned in England where foreign musicians were banned altogether.

Two problems at the core of the jazz art bothered French jazz musicians: that they did not "swing" and that their solos were shallow and disjointed, lacking a deeper mastery of the chord changes. The first charge was leveled by Stéphane Mougin, something of a firebrand and a talented pianist who wrote serious articles on jazz for the earliest French jazz magazines. As he put it in 1933:

It's when you deal with this problem that you can see that we are put in a position of inferiority by sheer fact that we are neither American nor English, in short that our mother tongue is different from theirs. But, there you have it!! We are French, and in the frenzy of attempting to be tempted by an exotic passion, we must learn everything and, if not become American, we must speak their

language, follow their customs, at least know enough to make jazz as they do.²²

His holism was exaggerated, perhaps, but in those early days of French jazz it was helpful to know as much about the American jazz scene as possible. Mougín also invoked cultural forces in charging that French musicians were unable to find that complete mastery which led to effortless ease and a natural swing:

Moreover, any kind of dance music *must make people dance*. It might seem ridiculous to mention this, but in France, it is absolutely necessary. Because the French have no sense of rhythm. It's probably a consequence of too great a civilization: but it's a fact that dancing, primitive pleasure above all, becomes dull when intellectualism grows.

There is nothing less swinging than a minuet. It's the fault of the *grand siècle's* affectedness. There is nothing more swinging than an African dance. French people have no sense of rhythm, I repeat loudly!

The swinging rhythmic pulse of jazz is its most Afro-American characteristic and one with which French musicians had substantial difficulty. The richness of West African rhythmic complexities atrophied in America but the tradition lived on in the counter-rhythms and four-beat accents which jazz drummers and dancers regularly used. Inheritors of a European musical tradition which underplayed rhythmic development, French musicians groped to understand the intense beat which they call "*Le Hot*." Finding words for it (*se balancer, osciller*) helped a little and Freddie Johnson's willingness to explain note placement, strong and weak beats and rhythmic doubling helped much more but, finally, only playing time and experience could teach proper note placement and jazz articulation. The eager, tense French jazzman had to learn to relax. As Mougín put it: "Whenever one senses effort, work there's nothing natural and consequently no swing. Ease is required, one must feel from the musician a total freedom, one must sense that he is liberated from all constraint and yet that his beat, his time are marvelously right and proportioned, in other words that his playing seems to be a *divine heritage*." For anyone raised in France, swinging was a very delicate refinement of the jazz art and a good way to learn to do it was to peel off as many layers of formal musical education as possible. Again, Mougín found a pleasantly French way of putting it: "Get up, swing your head left and right and sing a nice little French song in a tiny childish voice and, in so returning toward your first innocence you will rediscover some of the natural ease which you once had and which you should never have lost in order to make dance music and jazz music."²³ In the end, French jazzmen and fans adopted the American word for it complete with the infinitive *swinguer* (*il ne swinge pas*).

The second charge leveled against French musicians' attempts to master an American musical art was that their playing remained uncertain and disjointed. In 1931, Hugues Panassié, already writing articles on jazz, analyzed the reasons for a French inferiority complex in jazz.

. . . [It] is that they look for a style rather than style itself. It leads them to give too much importance to formulas, that is to certain types of phrasing which are often found in the best American hot musicians' solos. They try to place these phrases (in their solos) when they improvise and without noticing it, they upset their inspiration.

Where do the power and originality of the best American hot musicians come from? . . . from the fact that they are content to follow their hearts with the greatest freedom, all the while staying "in the style."²⁴

So too, in looking back at the early years, André Ekyan was struck by how little he and the other French musicians had learned. He lamented: ". . . poor orchestration, rudimentary construction, an inspiration which was often picturesque and singing but sometimes hesitating and faltering, a vigorous or inspired style, but still tainted by an incomplete musical training and, moreover, an instrumental technique still insufficient."²⁵ There were the inevitable problems of a learning jazz musician but they took on a more disturbing cultural dimension in France where it was possible to wonder if a Frenchman could ever, as he so wished, "play his hot?" Mougin put it truly: "There isn't any simple formula which can convert us into jazz musicians. It's more difficult than that."²⁶ They could insert "blue notes," rearrange the notes of the melodies, make "dirty" sounds but it would still not be integrated jazz but a collection of jazz traits.

The problem can be heard on the early French jazz records. Philippe Brun came to play the trumpet well in a style heavily influenced by Bix Beiderbecke. In his early career, André Ekyan sounded much like Frank Trumbauer on the alto saxophone. The young Alix Combelle could think of nothing but Coleman Hawkins. It was not just that the proper goal of American jazz was to develop an original, individual style, which all imitators lack, but that French emulation of American jazz sounds implied a deep cultural difference: Frenchmen ceaselessly imitating American musical parents.

And which parents were legitimate? Increasing numbers of both Black American jazzmen and records by them made their way to Paris. The white negrophile, Milton "Mezz" Mesirow first arrived in Paris in 1929 and very profoundly influenced Hugues Panassié. Later in the same year, Sam Wooding's band played the Embassy Club on the Champs-Élysées with such fine musicians as Adolphus "Doc" Cheatham and Eugene "Honeybear" Seduc. These Americans spread the word about Coleman Hawkins, Jimmy Noone, McKinney's Cotton Pickers and other Black stars.²⁷ In response, Philippe Brun tried to change his style to follow the approach of Louis Armstrong. French jazz well might continue to be a long succession of ever changing imitations of American players.²⁸

Sometime in the very early 1930s, French jazz reached a turning point: it might have become a modern form of colonial art, ceaselessly paying homage to the imperial models. Panassié saw this depressing possibility in 1931 when he wrote: ". . . the European musician tends to take these

clichéd phrases, these formulas as starting points and comes up with choruses which lack unity, where the flow of thought is not continuous. The American hot musician doesn't fumble to find his phrases. They automatically fit into his solo to blend with his thought."²⁹ Perhaps because he had tried unsuccessfully to play jazz himself Panassié went to the heart of the jazz art: for those with the gift, long years of instrumental practice and the simultaneous efforts to master harmonic and melodic structures flowered in that ability to create logical and swinging solos on the spot, without thinking about it. All the necessary ingredients were "under the fingers." Now the music flowed forth in the fleeting evanescence of jazz which makes all other places, players and performances superfluous. But could this obvious mastery take root in France where musicians had been so thoroughly schooled in classical traditions, so integrated into preconceived musical structures which minimized improvisation and individualism? The cultural *gestalt* of Stéphane Mougin offered to dash the hopes of aspiring French jazzmen:

How could you really separate jazz from the country of its birth, from almost the only country where it is accepted, in short, from the country of which it is the soul?

Is jazz music the negation of pure music? Is it possible for a musician to hear and feel pleasure when listening to a jazzband?³⁰

His questions were not rhetorical. He answered them negatively and expatriated to the United States where, presumably, he could assimilate enough of American culture to seize the country's soul! Mougin was tired of being considered "a poor relative" of the jazz family.

There were several possible levels of assimilation of jazz in France but the deepest, that of the aspiring French musician, was discouraged by much of the earliest French writing about jazz. The very first book of jazz criticism, the Belgian Robert Goffin's *Aux Frontières du Jazz*, emphasized the exotic foreign roots of the musical genre:

For years, Black orchestras played according to instinctive formulas, not following written music at all, changing the melody and bringing to each performance a little of the jolting and exaggerated characteristic which is an immediate clue to the color of the orchestra.

So too, Hugues Panassié, father of French jazz criticism, underscored repeatedly and with great emphasis that "the real" jazz was a Black American art. He admitted that he had enjoyed the records of the McKenzie-Condon Chicagoans at first but once apprized of the error of his taste, apologized and devoted the rest of his life to the promotion of Black American jazzmen. This was an inspiring example to American critics and a long-needed antidote to American racism. His stance brought invitations to many Black jazzmen to perform in Paris and it sold many of their records. It did have the effect of discouraging the idea that Frenchmen could play "the real" jazz, however. There were nearly no Black Frenchmen who evinced an interest in playing jazz while the two dozen or

so aspiring jazzmen were whites. Were they pursuing an illusion? Would their jazz necessarily be unauthentic? If so, the assimilation of jazz would be limited to the Black expatriate community's integration into French culture. The French assimilation of jazz principles would be otherwise impossible.

Perhaps in his enthusiasm for jazz music and in his horror at the injustice of American racism, Hugues Panassié overreacted, suggesting a reverse racism which devalued all that eager whites could learn from Black jazzmen. He and Robert Goffin discovered passion, emotion, spontaneity, freedom and anguish in Black jazz, but order, melody, form, poise and detachment in white jazz.³¹ Panassié complained about how difficult he found French jazz musicians, and they, in turn, must have found his message discouraging. The musicians approached jazz as a set of musical principles which could be learned from the Black masters by those who possessed the gift of improvisation. The result would never sound exactly like Black American jazz but the fundamentals of jazz could be assimilated into a sort of cultural synthesis . . . what Charles Delaunay called "l'école française" of jazz.

This synthesis was achieved by each of the French musicians who persevered with jazz, steadily perfecting his understanding and mastery, but the pinnacle of this cultural process was to be occupied by two exceptionally talented musicians: Stéphane Grappelly and Django Reinhardt. Other Frenchmen, André Ekyan and Alix Combelle notably, achieved individual mastery in jazz but the entire French jazz community came to be represented by Grappelly and Reinhardt. A rigorous sociology of jazz talent has proven impossible, as the gift seems to touch individuals of widely different backgrounds, but certain things can be said about France's first two Jazz Masters.

Most importantly neither musician had been dominated by French Classicism: Grappelly did have some conservatory training and won a first prize in music reading but had been obliged to cut short his studies to go to work at an early age. Born in Paris on January 26, 1908, Grappelly lost his mother when he was three years old and his father left him in 1914 to fight in World War I. Alone, he became a street musician who also worked in the pit bands of the silent movie theaters while supplementing his income as an errand boy, flower salesman and hatter. He specialized in playing Toselli's *Serenade* in restaurants and in the inner courtyards of apartment buildings. As he put it in a recent American interview: "As I had no teacher I had no direction . . . and I tried to copy people playing in the streets. If you want to hear some music you must go where the musicians are playing—and some were very near, playing in the courtyard, waiting for little coins to drop."³² Grappelly was open to new sounds and discovered "jazz" in a little shop where the public could listen to the latest records on a set of headphones. He heard by chance *Lady Be Good* "horribly" sung in French but the chord changes fascinated him.

Django Reinhardt was even less well integrated into French musical culture since he was a gypsy. He was born on January 23, 1910, at

Liverchies near Charleroi, Hainaut Province, Belgium, and his family were “*saltimbanques*,” traveling circus performers. His mother, nicknamed “Negros,” was an acrobat and dancer who refused to marry. His father, Jean Vees, played the violin and guitar occasionally, tuned pianos and specialized in renovating old musical instruments for resale as antiques. Django never learned to read or write, never lived in a house until his twentieth year (he preferred his horse-drawn caravan), never learned to read or write music, and never got around to securing identity papers or a passport. At twelve he got hold of a guitar and learned to play it on his own, by imitating the movements of musicians he saw in the “brasseries” of Porte Clignancourt where his father and his uncle played. His first jobs as a musician were in the dance halls (*bals musette*), but he hung-out at the Abbaye de Thélème, Place Pigalle listening to various American bands. A bohemian artist named Emile Savitry played Louis Armstrong records for him and Django went on to become a cabaret musician who specialized in American songs.³³

Grappelly and Reinhardt were two natural musicians who would have become virtuosi in whatever style of music they chose to play and with them France possessed two jazzmen of international quality who might defend French glory. Grappelly greatly admired the American jazz violinist Eddie South (“The Black Angel of the Violin”) and also Joe Venuti’s work with Eddie Lang but his own playing was individual in its tone and phrasing.³⁴ Grappelly’s strength went beyond instrumental technique, which he possessed abundantly then and now. Panassié waxed ecstatic: “His fiddle is not forceful or barrelhouse, or crude. Venuti attempts to attack with the fiddle, he makes it aggressive, he stomps with it. This man just sings. Venuti makes the fiddle male, Grappelly makes it female, melodic, flowering, warm, lovely, tragic.”³⁵

American jazz music found a resonant receptor in the gypsy Django Reinhardt, heir to a rebellious musical heritage which traditionally existed in about the same relationship to European concert music as jazz did in America. Raised in a musical tradition which stressed rhythmic variety, syncopation, dance music, swing and complexity of improvisation, Reinhardt achieved a mastery in swing and improvisation beyond anything possessed by his French contemporaries. Unlike them, he was predisposed toward the musical elements of jazz from the start and dismissed such major handicaps as his burn-crippled fretting hand on his way to a major reinterpretation of the guitar as a solo voice in jazz. Django absorbed American music and sent it back vastly enriched.

Grappelly and Reinhardt were at the core of the French synthesis of American jazz. They gave it distinction and authority and around them was constructed an entire patriotic artistic structure. In the fall of 1932, some university students had enlisted the help of Hugues Panassié in organizing *Le Hot Club de France* to help promote jazz and organize the fans in its support. The organization was the first of its kind in the world although quickly imitated by Marshall Stearns and Milt Gabler in the States. The organization staged the first jazz concerts in France beginning

on February 1, 1933, at the Ecole Normale de Musique in Paris. Many other concerts followed. Hot Club members provided the subscription list for the publication of Panassié's book *Le Jazz Hot* which caused a great stir in the U.S. The Hot Club of France was a very gallic idea: visiting American jazzmen expected to find a basement club and shook their heads in wonder at a national organization of jazz lovers! So much did the HCF stem from the French bureaucratic tradition that its two leaders, Panassié and Delaunay, had to discourage eager assistants who sent long internal memoranda and belabored complex organizational charts. Like everything else except agriculture in France, the Hot Club was centered in Paris from which it issued its directives to the provinces. It came as a great surprise to Americans to see "the French" organizing jazz and publishing long and serious essays which treated music as an art form. Despite some chauvinistic muttering from Eddie Condon to the effect: "Do we go over there and tell them how to stomp on a grape?", Panassié's book was well received in the United States. Barney Bigard, in Paris for the Duke Ellington Orchestra's premier concert in July, 1933, suggested that Panassié title his book "Gettin' Off With A Swing." The author thought that was well done but untranslatable into French.

This book along with that of Goffin and Charles Delaunay's *Hot Discography*³⁶ were the first books ever published about jazz. In the same vein, the Hot Club gave France the honor of presenting some of the first jazz concerts in history beginning in 1933. Benny Goodman's famous Carnegie Hall concert did not take place until January 16, 1938.

It is true that France contained few "nightclubs" on the American pattern: the cafés were not designed for listening to music primarily. Acoustics and seating often presented problems for jazz performance. So, too, the cabarets were accustomed to offering variety shows which would please the greatest number of persons possible. Requiring that everyone listen to American jazz would have been economically hazardous. The few clubs which featured jazz, like Bricktop's, were small and very avant garde. Thus, jazz music could not easily find in France the kind of performance environment it knew in the United States.

Yet it would be a mistake to attribute France's invention of jazz concerts to the force of circumstances. Panassié and Delaunay heard in jazz something of artistic value comparable to classical symphonic and chamber music and the two men deserve the credit for actively placing jazz in concert halls. They simply never thought of jazz as a raucous background for drinking. They thought that jazz was better than that and presented it in the prestigious, acoustically impeccable Salle Pleyel so that the public could hear it as clearly as classical music. Delaunay *never* saw it otherwise. From the start, he believed jazz was a music "à prendre en considération." Only a very few Americans felt the same way but one of them, John Hammond, who kept in touch with the French scene, followed the example of Delaunay and Panassié in his subsequent Carnegie Hall concerts "From Spirituals to Swing."

But surely the most important musical contribution in France's

nationalization of jazz was the Quintette of the Hot Club of France. It seemed important in 1934 to form an all-French band. The French jazz inferiority complex had to be ended along with the charges of jazz provincialism. Moreover, the Hot Club wanted to encourage a broader, popular assimilation of jazz in France. Musicians and critics alike realized that jazz sounded too loud, brassy and discordant to the French public. An all-string group would have a greater popular appeal. Then, too, Grappelly and Reinhardt both played instruments which were easily drowned by the usual brass instruments played in America. Their abilities could not be presented to best advantage in an American-style band. In fact, all these motives merged and the Quintette of the Hot Club of France became the pet project of the French jazz community.

Originally, the group was a quartet composed of violin, two guitars and double bass but Reinhardt objected that when Grappelly soloed he was backed by two guitars but when he, Reinhardt, soloed only one guitar and the bass supported him. Another acoustic guitar was added and at the first concert on December 2, 1934, the personnel were Django, his brother Joseph, cartoonist Roger Chaput on acoustic guitars, Louis Vola on string bass and, of course, the great Grappelly on violin. Soon afterward the group began a prolific recording career with its classic sides of *Dinah*, *Tiger Rag*, *Lady Be Good*, and *I Saw Stars*.

Several things make the Quintette of the Hot Club of France remarkable for our purposes: obviously its name reflected the proud rebelliousness of a Declaration of Jazz Independence. Panassié and Delaunay were hardly narrow chauvinists, rather, they used the name and the QHCF approach to promote jazz among the French people and their efforts met with success. The Quintette's records were a sensation and they are still taped and piped into public places in France by musak machines. Moreover, the jazz community was still very small in France and the QHCF served to tighten the ranks and focus the attention of a very individualistic jazz fraternity. Jazz has always been about to die in America and the Hot Club approach kept it alive and growing in France.

Moreover, the organization was able to pull the music up out of the nightclub crucible from which it had journeyed to France. The Hot Club never dominated the jazz scene, in fact its Quintette existed only for concerts and recording sessions, but it was able to foreshorten the more debilitating effects of the American nightclubs on jazz artists. In the artistic and intellectual melting pot of Paris between the two great wars, jazz was reborn in a different cultural setting which gave it some dignity as an art. In spite of some trendy posturing by the nonmusicians, it did jazz no harm whatsoever to be presented at a "vernissage" on March 5, 1937, along with four paintings by Picabia, a poem by Blaise Cendrars illustrated by Sonia Delaunay, drawings by Jacques-Henri Levesque and Jean Van Heeckeren, the collages of Camille Bryen, the records of Marcel Duchamp and the manuscripts of Georges Herment.³⁷

But the Quintette of the Hot Club of France achieved a musical synthesis of the American and French traditions. There was its very

European instrumentation: the stringed instruments were the core of the French musical tradition and that brassy American sound bothered the French public. French musicians naturally tended to play stringed instruments: Grappelly, for example, had played with an all-string group using two guitars and a banjo-mandolin as early as 1924.³⁸ Django Reinhardt was the best of a large number of guitar players, many of whom were gypsies too. Mougin was a pianist, Grappelly doubled on the piano, Brun began on the violin, and so on. The culture emphasized stringed instruments. The tradition has continued and France's most famous jazzmen today are pianists Claude Bolling and Marshall Solal and violinists Jean-Luc Ponty and Didier Lockwood.

So, too, one should note what the QHCF did not do. First, it had no drums. There was a good punch with the two guitar-string bass foundation, especially when the Reinhardt brothers are playing rhythm. In any event, the drums would have disturbed the balance of the group unless played with extreme discretion. Secondly, although other jazzmen recorded with the Quintette, it remained a quintette. In the mid-1930s it is questionable whether an all-French Big Band could have been organized. It certainly would have been hard for it to find employment for the first war and the Depression had hit France hard and left few cabarets willing and able to pay for a twelve-piece band. Thus the classic Hot Club sound remained that of the small group of stringed instruments. Since the two soloists possessed great instrumental technique, the group had elegance and finesse.

An analysis of original numbers, written by Reinhardt and/or Grappelly and usually performed by the Quintette of the Hot Club of France, best reveals the synthesis of musical traditions in this early French school of American jazz. All of these original works are remarkable for their purity and lack of commercial gimmicks; the French jazzmen worked with the most central principles of the genre. Such classics as *Daphne*, *Swing Guitars*, *Bricktop*, *Swinging with Django*, *Djangology*, *Minor Swing*, *Oriental Shuffle*, *Paramount Stomp*, and the great *Minor Swing*³⁹ reveal similarities.

These numbers usually begin with a very simple "head" arrangement featuring the unison statement of a swinging riff figure. *Daphne*, a jump number features this theme:

Daphne Grappelly/Reinhardt

UP TEMPO

tr.

Swing Guitars is similarly structured and features a slightly more complex riff theme. This number, like *Daphne*, contains a very bland release which varies thematically from chorus to chorus. *Minor Swing* has no bridge as it is really a modified blues.

Swing Guitars

Moderate Swing Grappelly/Reinhardt

Minor Swing, on which Reinhardt played several stunning solo choruses looks like this:

Minor Swing

moderate Grappelly
Reinhardt

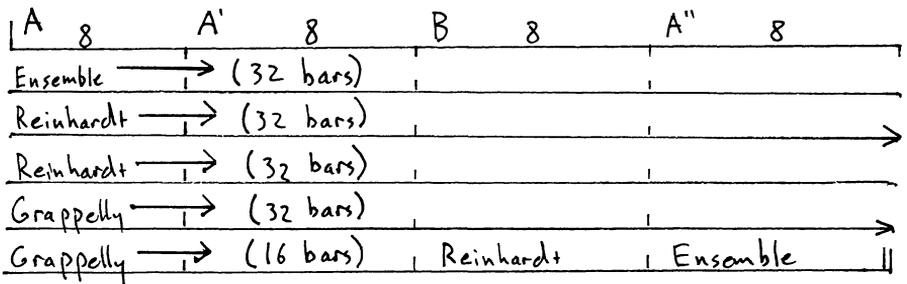
1. Str. Bass

glissando

2. Str. Bass 2nd x only

These are remarkably unadorned melodic themes which frame and highlight the ornate solo improvisations of the two leaders.

Secondly, these French contributions to the jazz repertoire usually follow variations of the classic 32-bar AABA structure of most American popular songs of the time. Thus, it is worth noting that when they turned from the American material to songs of their own devising, Reinhardt and Grappelly remained under the influence of the American song form. Then, too, their numbers were highly structured as one is always aware of moving through the 8 bar A' before repeating it in A'', moving into the channel B in a different key, and then moving back to a reiteration of A. After the opening ensemble, Reinhardt would play one of his ornate single-string improvisations and often extend into two or more choruses, alternating chordal and single string statements in the second chorus. Grappelly usually followed with a hot chorus and the first sixteen bars of the next before ceding the Bridge to Django and rejoining him for the last 8 bars out chorus. It often looked like this:



This is the central idea of the Quintette arrangements although minor variations were sometimes introduced. In this structure Reinhardt soloed a bit more than Grappelly. He also dominated the rhythm section.

The cultural importance of what had happened was highlighted by the insights of Charles Delaunay who did not forget Reinhardt was a French-speaking gypsy no matter how well he played jazz. Delaunay asked Reinhardt to record a solo improvisation in a recording session he directed on April 27, 1937. The result was labeled *Improvisation*. Django's playing "wanders from jazz music to rediscover from time to time gypsy-inspired music, Andalusian music: Django was carried away completely by the inspiration of the moment."

Delaunay also remained aware of the classical background usually submerged in jazz performances by the Quintette and, in a moment of inspiration, brought to a recording session which he had organized on November 23, 1937, the sheet music from Bach's first movement of the *Concerto in D Minor*. At this session, Stéphane Grappelly was to record with the great American violinist Eddie South whom he had always much admired and who was known for his classical as well as jazz playing. Delaunay wanted to try to wed the European and American musical traditions in an explicit fusion which used European material in a jazz

spirit rather than the reverse which was more often the case. He asked that the two violinists, backed by Django Reinhardt, perform the Bach piece, having supplied the guitarist with a record since he couldn't read music. Delaunay had always heard Bachian echoes in jazz polyphony but as the recording started he thought that the musicians were too awed by the charts to get the jazz feel. He took the sheet music away and asked them to play it again, but this time with more spirit. Their results, complete with introduction taken from Louis Armstrong's *Mahogany Hall Stomp*, are particularly successful.

There was much more to French jazz than the Quintette of the Hot Club of France. On April 28, 1937, Delaunay demonstrated this with his first recording session on his own Swing label. France's two fine saxophone players Alix Combelle and André Ekyan were joined by Coleman Hawkins and Benny Carter and backed by Grappelly on piano, Reinhardt, Eugene d'Hellemmes on bass and Tommy Benford on the drums. Their version of *Crazy Rhythm* caused a sensation in Europe and America. The Franco-American group swung hard and all of the soloists played with great authority. So, too, many more great sessions would be recorded by all French, Franco-American, Franco-Expatriate and expatriate combinations. As France faced the prospect of World War II, jazz had taken root there and was beginning to flourish.

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notes

1. Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (New York, 1968), 247-250; Gérard Conte, "Jim Europe et les Hellfighters," *Jazz Hot* (October, 1968), 8-9; James Lincoln Collier, *The Making of Jazz: A Comprehensive History* (New York, 1978), 313-338; Frank Tirro, *Jazz: A History* (New York, 1977), 209-238.
2. Gérard Conte, "Les Mitchell's Jazz Kings," *Le Jazz Hot* (October, 1969), 34-36.
3. I have translated all citations from the French sources used in this article. When more than one translation of a word or phrase was possible, the one conforming to American jazz parlance was used. A particularly strong discussion of relationships between musical theater and early jazz in France is Chris Goddard, *Jazz Away From Home* (London, Paddington, 1979), chapter 2. Interview with Charles Delaunay, France, August 4, 1981.
4. Ray Binder, "Historique du Jazz," *Jazz-Tango* (December, 1931), 6.
5. I would like to thank Charles Delaunay and Joel O'Sickey for playing me records from this era. None of the opinions here expressed about that music should be attributed to anyone but the author, however.
6. Louis-Victor Mialy, "Le Légendaire Léo Vauchant vous parle . . . ," *Le Jazz Hot* (December, 1969), 26-28.
7. I would like to thank Warren Plath of Chicago, Illinois, for sending me Xerox copies of this rare magazine, not among the collections of the Bibliothèque Nationale.
8. *La Revue de Jazz* (July, 1929; August, 1929); M. MacKnight, "Quelques considérations sur le 'hot chorus' en générale et le 'hot chorus' commercial en particulier," *La Revue de Jazz* (October, 1929), 8-10.
9. Interview with Charles Delaunay, Villetaneuse, France, August 4, 1981; Collier, *Making of Jazz*, 322.
10. Hugues Panassié, *Douze Années de Jazz, 1927-1938: Souvenirs* (Paris, 1938), 18, 138.
11. Louis-Victor Mialy, "Le Légendaire Léo Vauchant," *Le Jazz Hot* (December, 1969), 26-28; second article by author, with same title, *Le Jazz Hot* (January, 1970), 23-25.
12. Panassié, *Douze Années*, 14-15.
13. "Philippe Brun," *Jazz-Tango*, March 1, 1931, 3; Delaunay Interview, August 4, 1981.
14. Hugues Panassié, "André Ekyan," *Le Jazz Hot* (December, 1936), 9.
15. Panassié, *Douze Années*, 10-15; André Hodeir, "Panorama du Jazz Français," *Bulletin du Hot Club de France* (January, 1945), 8-9, 18; Frank Tenot, "Les Quatres Générations du Jazz Français," *Le Jazz Hot* (May, 1948), 9.

16. "Maurice Chaillou," *Jazz-Tango* (May, 1931), 3.
17. Hodeir, "Panorama," (January, 1945); Charles Delaunay, "Le Jazz en France, 1932-1944," *Jazz Hot* (May, 1969), 26-27, 29.
18. Ekyan, "Retour sur le Jazz," *Le Jazz Hot* (December, 1945), 11.
19. Mialy, "Le Légendaire Léo Vauchant," *Le Jazz Hot* (January, 1970), 23-25.
20. Stéphane Mougin, "Négromanie," *Jazz-Tango* (December, 1931), 7; (March, 1931), 10.
21. Albert Ferreri, "Défense des Musiciens Français," *Revue du Hot Club de France* (July, August, 1946), 17.
22. Stéphane Mougin, "Le Swing," *Jazz-Tango-Dancing* (October, 1933), 3.
23. Delaunay Interview; Panassié, *Douze Années*, 107-114; Mougin, "Le Swing," 3; Goddard, *Jazz Away From Home*, 90-92, 103-106.
24. Hugues Panassié, "Remarques sur le Style Hot," *Jazz-Tango* (September, 1931), 5.
25. Ekyan, "Retour sur le Jazz," 11.
26. Stéphane Mougin, "Le Jazz-Le Hot," *La Revue de Jazz* (October, 1929), 4.
27. Panassié, *Douze Années*, 10, 40-70.
28. Ray Binder, "Historique du Jazz," *Jazz-Tango-Dancing* (March, 1932), 7; Stéphane Mougin, "Article Incompris," *Jazz-Tango-Dancing* (April, 1932), 3.
29. Panassié, "Remarques sur le Style Hot," 5.
30. Stéphane Mougin, "La Musique de Jazz," *La Revue de Jazz* (July, 1929), 9.
31. Hugues Panassié, "Aux Frontières du Jazz par Robert Goffin," *Jazz-Tango-Dancing* (August, 1932), 5, 7.
32. "Stéphane Grappelly," *Jazz-Tango* (December, 1931), 7; Helen Oakley and Hugues Panassié, "Stéphane Grappelly," *Le Jazz Hot* (April, 1936), 12; Charles Delaunay, *Django Mon Frère* (Paris, 1968), 71-73; Lee Jeske, "Stéphane Grappelly: Fiddler Fantastique," *down beat* (April, 1981), 15-18, 64-65.
33. Delaunay, *Django Mon Frère*, 9-19, 29-47.
34. Collier, *Making of Jazz*, 313-338.
35. Oakley and Panassié, "Stéphane Grappelly," 12.
36. (Paris: Hot Jazz, 1936; 2nd ed., Paris, 1938; 3rd ed., New York: Commodore Record Club, 1943). All three editions are essentially club publications.
37. *Le Jazz Hot* (March-April, 1937), 17.
38. Delaunay, *Django Mon Frère*, 71.
39. Transcriptions are taken from: *djangologie*, VI Pathé-Marconi, 1978; *In Memorium 1908-1954 Django Reinhardt*, R.C.A. Victor LPM-1100, 1955; *The Best of Django Reinhardt*, Capitol Records, 1960. For complete discographical data see: Brian Rust, *Jazz Records, 1897-1942* (Essex, England, 1975), I, 729; II, 1351, 1564; Delaunay, *Django Mon Frère*, discography.