

# THE CAT'S MEOW



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## Gypsy Jazz

Heyward Street United Methodist Church

2501 Heyward Street, Columbia, SC

2:30-5:00 pm Sunday, May 5, 2024

Les Flat Out Strangers will share the bandstand with our band at our April concert.

Back in 2020 Red Smith wrote the newsletter for our club. The following is an excerpt from his description of “Les Flat Out Strangers” and Django Reinhardt.

The “Strangers” play gypsy jazz – music developed by a real gypsy, Django Reinhardt. Les Flat Out Strangers play regularly at the “First Thursday” Main Street celebration on the sidewalk outside the Lula Drake restaurant and wine bar.

Django was born in a gypsy caravan while his parents roamed around the countryside on the border between France and Belgium.

Django had almost no formal education, neither academic nor musical. And he never lost his gypsy ways. But he made up for those deficiencies by using his native intelligence and his native musical ability.

He developed a broad set of skills, especially skills that could be self taught (billiards, fishing, music). In fact, he was playing music professionally before his teens. He started on violin and then gravitated to guitar.

Whats more, he developed a marvelous guitar technique in spite of a serious injury to his left hand. The injury occurred when a candle fell over in his caravan (using the British definition) and ignited the celluloid his wife used to make artificial flowers.

The caravan was quickly engulfed in flames and Django was badly burned, so badly that he was hospitalized for 18 months. The doctors recommended amputating his leg

but Django refused and with dogged work, regained the ability to walk – but only with a cane. Plus his ring finger and little finger were injured so badly that he used them only for chord work – but what marvelous music he made with what remained of those fingers! And it helped that his brother had just given him a new Selmer guitar.

About this time, Django heard jazz for the first time. An acquaintance introduced him to recordings of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Joe Venuti and Eddie Lang. In my opinion, this was a fortuitous circumstance. Jazz allowed Django the freedom to improvise and that fit Django's personality. And jazz welcomed the gypsy harmonies into the jazz he began playing with Stephane Grappelli and the Hot Club of France (by the way this was one, of the few jazz bands composed entirely of stringed instruments). This was back in the 1930's and Django quickly joined forces with Stephane. But Django played with musicians as disparate as Louis Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie also.

Django was on tour in Great Britain when WWII broke out but he left his wife there and returned to France. He reformed the quintet in Paris, a risky decision because the Nazis herded Romani into work camps and concentration camps. And they thought jazz was an international conspiracy to undermine Germany's greatness. But Django was the most popular jazz musician in Europe and a jazz loving Luftwaffe officer allowed him to return to Paris when he was captured trying to escape from occupied France. One of his songs "Nuages" became an unofficial anthem signifying hope for liberation – during one concert the crowd made him play it three times in a row.

After the war Django rejoined Grappelli in the UK. Then he made his first tour in the US debuting in Cleveland as a special guest soloist with Duke Ellington and his orchestra. He also played two nights at Carnegie Hall getting six curtain calls the first night.

But Django never lost his love of the gypsy life. One spring he was to receive an official honor from the French Government and didn't show up. He explained afterward that the peach trees were blooming and he had taken the family on a trip through the countryside in his caravan as if that's what anyone would do.

**Red Smith**