

THE SWEET AND LOWDOWN

THE GYPSY PROJECT

YOSHI'S JAZZ CLUB

MARCH 9, 2003



Went to Yoshi's Jazz Club in the middle of the week to catch Bireli Lagrene and his Gypsy Project incinerate the house with Django Reinhardt-style jazz. Lagrene, native of Alsace in France, began playing guitar at age 4 and was winning competitions by age twelve. His father was a well-known gypsy-style guitarist in pre-war France, and the talent has been passed down as well as amplified in the son. After a foray into jazz-fusion with Larry Coryell, Lagrene has returned to his roots with the fast and furious style of Django Reinhardt.

Reinhardt, born in 1910 and died 1953, is often called "The World's Greatest Guitarist". Maimed by a caravan fire early in his career, Django still could play better than anyone before or since with the use of only three fingers

on his left hand. In the Woody Allen movie *Sweet and Lowdown* the "World's Second Greatest Guitarist" (Sean Penn) falls down into a faint every time he catches sight of Reinhardt who formed the Jazz Hot Club of France with violinist Stephane Grappelli, playing a lively, bouncy jazz throughout Europe until the Second World War, when Grappelli fled to England. Miraculously, Reinhardt survived the war while the Nazis systematically exterminated the Gypsies as target #2 for the KZ camp ovens, continuing to play the proscribed jazz during the Occupation.

Lagrene, born in 1966, easily mastered the style, playing with an eerie similarity to the great master. Bireli has played with Stephane Grappelli, Benny Goodman, Benny Carter and many other jazz greats. Thursday night was expected to be light in attendance, as the gypsy style of jazz is not as well known in this country as in France, where the form has the same kind of following as bluegrass here. The show sold out, however, and, when word of the jazz explosion that happened mid-week at Yoshi's got out, every succeeding show sold out as well, even as Yoshis (understandably) jacked ticket prices another \$15 on top of the original \$17.

Instead of sticking to a dour note-for-note transcription of classics, Lagrene clowned and mugged with violinist Florin Nicolescu (Romania) and traded licks back and forth like two old friends having the time of their lives. Bireli demonstrated a dazzling array of techniques on his Django-style tenor guitar, easily flowing bends, hammer-ons, trills, harmonics, slides, and rapid-fire scale runs in perfect time with not a single note amiss for one and a half hours. At one

point he played 8 bars of a piece entirely with the ringing tones of harmonics, managing to coax the distinctive sound everywhere on the fret board from the 12th to the 3rd fret. Another time he created a descending scale on the low E string by quickly detuning the guitar, while holding the fast beat, in *mid-song!*

When the quartet left the stage after 90 minutes, the entire audience rose up in a thundering standing ovation. He and Florin returned for a nice little "guitar and violin outdo" before leaving to yet another standing ovation and loud cheering from the audience.