

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT *11/23/2006 It's been over a year since the gypsy-jazz trio known as Swing Caravan took the stage at Mocha Maya's Cafe. It continues to play there every other Friday night and has taken root: spreading the infectious, joyous music made famous in the 1930s by Django Reinhardt and the Quintette of the Hot Club of France.

Swing Caravan will be at Mocha Maya's again Friday night, warming up crowds that come to Shelburne Falls for the annual Moonlight Madness festivities, beginning at 6 p.m.

Swing Caravan will also play the Montague Book Mill on Dec. 2 at 8 p.m. and will ring in New Year's Eve at Mocha Maya's.

The Mocha Maya's audience for this trio has been building over the past year, with people driving up from Northampton and even Connecticut to hear Reinhardt's "Nuages" or "Minor Swing" combined with original tunes and even standards played in gypsy-jazz style.

Lead guitarist Matthew Ruby Shippee has been playing guitar since age 13, although his exploration of gypsy jazz sound began about five years ago.

An ethnomusicologist, Shippee, 36, also chairs the Greenfield Community College's Music Department. He currently teaches courses in world music, improvisation and contemporary performance and composition.

Shippee, who lives in Plainfield, grew up admiring Bob Dylan's music and, as a musician, began writing his own music "right away." By 17, Shippee was playing professionally.

Before his teaching career, Shippee was earning a living as a singer-songwriter, he said.

Shippee had never heard of French jazz giant Reinhardt until he studied jazz in college. "I was exposed to Django but didn't tackle it," he says of the gypsy jazz. "I've listened to it ever since, but didn't start playing it until about three years ago."

That was when he met Jack Brown, now 33, rhythm guitarist for Swing Caravan. Brown, of Easthampton, is also manager of the Pleasant Street Theater in Northampton.

"We started playing this music, and we were playing with different people, informally," Shippee said. "I had this idea to start a band as a trio, with two guitars and a bass player, and guest musicians -- with accordions, violins, clarinets or percussion (musicians) joining in, as would happen in a gypsy caravan."

The third member of the trio is double bass player Dan Pac, 27, of Shelburne Falls. Recently, percussionist Dave Nelson of Ashfield has been "sitting in steadily," as Shippee puts it. "I love the caravan aspect of it," said Shippee. "I love the way we can connect musicians we love to the community we love."

Although you may not be familiar with the term "gypsy jazz," you may have already heard some elements of Reinhardt's music in recent films: in the oracle scene in "Matrix," in "The Aviator" ("I Can't Give You Anything But Love"), in the background of Steve Martin's "L.A. Story," and as background music for a number of Woody Allen films. Fictional guitarist Emmet Ray (played by Sean Penn) idolized him in the Woody Allen's "Sweet and Lowdown." Also, the animated feature film "The Triplets of Bellville" includes a cartoon image of the gypsy musician.

Reinhardt was born in 1910 in a Belgium gypsy camp. He spent most of his youth in gypsy encampments, professionally playing banjo, guitar and violin from an early age, before tragedy struck.

When Reinhardt was 18, he knocked over a candle, which ignited celluloid and paper flowers that his wife made to sell. He was pulled from the fire with first- and second-degree burns over half his body, including two left-hand fingers. Doctors believed he would never play the guitar again.

His brother Joseph, also a guitarist, bought Django a new guitar and, with painful rehabilitation and practice, Reinhardt relearned his craft in a completely new way -- even though his third and fourth fingers were partially paralyzed.

Playing like Django turned out to be a challenge for Shippee. As a college student at St. Michaels College in Vermont, and at Xavier University in New Orleans, he had learned how to play jazz guitar "the right way."

"Django was not trained," Shippee explained. "He developed this whole style, which you need to imitate to get the whole style of music down."

With acoustic music, it was necessary for Reinhardt and his fellow musicians to play hard and loud to compete with accordions, with people talking inside cafes, with people dancing. "It was always a loud environment and they didn't have amplifiers," said Shippee.

Beyond the gypsy music Reinhardt grew up with, his main, modern influence was American jazz great Louis Armstrong. Shippee said Reinhardt blended Eastern European chords prevalent in his own Romanian heritage with the swing beat of Armstrong's music.

"He'd learn it by ear," Shippee says of Reinhardt. "He made (the music) flow all the way up the neck. That made a huge difference."

"As guitarists today, we had to learn the way. It's so clearly rooted in folk music, and in a folk style."

"That's what (folk) music invites us to do today: you play by ear and you put your own personality into your music," said Shippee. "That doesn't happen in other forms of music -- not in classical, and not in mainstream jazz."

Despite losing two fretting fingers, Reinhardt's fame really began on the eve of World War II. In 1934, he and his brother Joseph joined jazz violinist Stephane Grappelli, Louis Vola and Roger Chaput to form the "Quintette du Hot Club de France."

Wikipedia.org claims the concept of "lead guitar" (Django) and backing "rhythm guitar" was born with that band. They also used their guitars for percussive sounds, because they had no true percussive section.

"Django became famous while France was occupied by Germany," said Shippee.

"That was one of the reasons why he lived," added Shippee, alluding to the numbers of gypsies killed in Hitler's camps.

"After he became famous, he would go and give concerts," said Shippee. "There are stories of American and Germans coming together (during the war) and listening to this music."

Shippee said gypsy folk music has many parallels to African American folk music: both transcend the day-to-day oppression, both show lots of individuality.

"But Paris after World War II started over, basically, in music," said Shippee. "There was a real division between pre-World War II and post-World War II music. Music in Paris turned just like a snap of the fingers."

Shippee said more American sounds, jazz and bebop, replaced Reinhardt's cheerful relentless swing.

"But Django was ready to turn," said Shippee. "He tried to adapt." Reinhardt didn't live long enough to either transform his trademark sound, or to have it become a relic. He died of a brain hemorrhage in 1953, when he was 43 years old.

Although the music he was best known for may have fallen out of fashion, Reinhardt was revered by world-class musicians. Guitarists who have cited him as a major influence include Carlos Santana, B.B. King, the Grateful Dead's Jerry Garcia, Jeff Beck, Les Paul and Stevie Ray Vaughan.

According to Wikipedia.org, when guitarist Chet Atkins was asked to name the 10 greatest guitarists of the 20th century, he placed Reinhardt at the top of the list.

Shippee and Brown play Selmer-style guitars, which are braced differently and have a different sound than do traditional acoustic guitars. The trio uses little amplifiers and Shippee, who sings occasional ballads, uses a microphone, he said.

He said his vocals have rock and world-music influences. "When I started doing Caravan as a band, it was to be firmly rooted in gypsy jazz, but to have some branches on the tree."

Those branches, he said, include vocals, a few standard tunes, original songs and improvisations.

"Purists often miss the spirit of what the music was about in the first place," said Shippee. "What I'm most proud of is how we can be really playful. We're a really tight trio. We can play spontaneous fun music that isn't like anyone else's."

The trio hopes to release its first CD early next year, possibly in February.

A Web site is also in the works. Meanwhile, more information is available about the band through its "My Space" site, at: www.myspace.com/swingcaravan

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