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John Jorgenson

BY MATT BLACKETT

"WHEN I FIRST HEARD DJANGO," SAYS JOHN Jorgenson, "I couldn't believe that sound was coming from an acoustic guitar, because it was *electrifying*. The tonality and the emotion and passion reminded me of Jimi Hendrix. I immediately started trying to learn gypsy jazz, and I've studied it and played it for my own enjoyment ever since. All the time I was in the Desert Rose Band, the Hellecasters, or playing with Elton John, I would still go to the Django festivals and jam with people. And when I was at home, that's the kind of stuff I would play."

Jorgenson has been a serious gypsy jazz guitarist and bandleader for a while now, and his latest release with his quintet, *Ultraspontane* [J2], not only advances the state of the gypsy art but also serves as a great showcase for his unbelievable chops.

The instrumentation and the tones on *Ultraspontane* are traditional, but some of the tunes aren't.

You're right. Where it diverges from gypsy jazz is with the grooves, arrangements, and songs. There's not a lot of four-beat swing stuff or traditional ballads.

Was it a conscious decision to steer clear of the more conventional material?

It actually happened pretty naturally. While I was touring with my quintet, the songs I had written that were a little different were the ones people really responded to, so I naturally

went with that feedback from the audience. I also felt that there's plenty of traditional stuff out there already. I'm certainly not going to better Django Reinhardt.

What was the recording process like?

We did the tracking at my bass player Charlie Chadwick's studio. He has a lot of isolation booths, so we didn't sit in the same room, but we all played at the same time to get the basic feel of everything. Then, we'd go back and fix things where we needed to. I think we used an AKG C 414 on the rhythm guitar, and a Neumann on the bass. For the violin, I positioned an RCA mic close to the instrument to get the fat-bodied sound, and an AKG C 451 a little further away to get the sparkly high end. I eventually replaced all my scratch lead-guitar parts, and I used a big variety of mics. Usually, a vintage RCA ribbon mic would be in there, as well as a stereo Royer ribbon, a Groove Tubes GT1, or a Sony C38. I would use three or even four mics for my guitar sound.

Did you play any rhythm guitar?

Sometimes. On a lot of the tracks, I would have my rhythm guitarist, Gonzalo Bergara, play a second rhythm to double himself. Occasionally, I would add one, and, sometimes, it would be just one track of Gonzalo.

Your licks at 2:55 in the solo to "Swingapore" are pretty mind-boggling. Are you using sweep picking



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for the ascending runs? How do you play the crazy chromatic descent?

It's kind of like sweep picking, but it's measured. With most sweep picking, you don't hear a really strong attack on every note. This technique comes out of a rest-stroke technique that's usually used with the gypsy jazz style. Every note is pretty distinct. It's a lot of work with the right hand. For the first part, I use a downstroke on the *D* string, an upstroke on the *D*, then three downstrokes in a row on the *G*, *B*, and *E* strings, and, finally, a second note on the high *E* with an upstroke that gets me ready to jump back to the *D* string. I apply that picking pattern to a *D* chord, and then it moves up to a *D7♭9* and keeps moving through inversions of *D7♭9* until I land on a high *G* at the 15th fret.

For the descending licks, I'm playing minor thirds on the *B* and *E* strings with a tricky right-hand pattern that starts with an upstroke on the *E*, then a downstroke on the *B*, a downstroke on the *E*, and then back to an upstroke on the *E*, and so on.

That picking pattern doesn't seem logical. Did you always play like that?



RIFFS Acoustic

“It sounds corny, but I don't think there would be guitar playing as we know it today had Django not done what he did. I think he was the first guitar hero.”

It is different. My stuff with the Hellecasters was either regular flatpicking or hybrid picking. But, for this style, the techniques for the right and left hands are really unusual. You don't find them in any other style. The actual rules of gypsy jazz picking are you never play an upstroke unless you're already on the string. You use downstrokes as much as possible—even if you're traveling from treble strings to bass strings. I don't adhere to that strictly—and a lot of other players don't, either—but it's a key component to the style, and it is important to get that sound. You can't just use alternate

picking. I couldn't do the licks you mentioned in “Swingapore” with alternate picking. They just wouldn't sound right, and they'd be a lot harder. So it's a whole different vocabulary to learn with your right hand. With the left hand, it's also a stamina thing, because the action has to be up high enough so you can hit it hard and not fret out. You also have to hit every note with a whole lot of personality and vibe. A mistake I hear a lot of players make is they just finger the note, and then pick it—one after another. That doesn't say anything. It's not vibey or exciting or passionate or mournful or happy

or sad. It's not anything. If you're using an acoustic guitar to play gypsy jazz, every note has to have a meaning. It has to go somewhere.

What's your live rig for this band?

I use one of my Gitane signature models, the DG320, which is a 14-fret D-hole model. On the face of the guitar, right behind the treble moustache on the bridge, I have a Schertler DYNG dynamic contact mic. I also use an Audio-Technica Pro 70 mic. I attach some foam to the top of the guitar near the tailpiece, and then I have the Pro 70 suspended in foam pointing very close to the face. Its little cable goes around the tailpiece. I put

both of those into my Schertler Unico amp. For effects, I'm using a Zoom A2.1u. It's an acoustic processor that has a volume pedal on it. I use it mostly for reverb, but I also use the volume pedal to back off a little when I play rhythm. It's helpful for EQ tweaks, as well. Gypsy jazz guitars tend to have a humpy low midrange. The body resonance is around a low B on my D-hole, so I cut that frequency a little using the Zoom box.

I read that you learned to play Django's solos with two fingers.

I did. I wanted to see what positions he played in. That ended up taking me all over the fretboard in a completely different way than any other style. You have to travel differently with just two fingers. It's a great way to learn the fretboard—even if you don't want to play gypsy jazz. It makes your playing more colorful, too, because the ranges of the guitar all sound so different.

Where do you place Django on the list of all-time great innovators?

At the top. Number one. As far as I know, he was the first guitarist to be a soloist and lead his own jazz band. He was doing that

in 1934. Charlie Christian was heavily influenced by Django—he used to play Django solos before he would play his own choruses. Les Paul was heavily influenced by Django. He used to try to copy his licks, runs, and repertoire. The only artist that Chet Atkins asked for an autograph was Django. Django toured in England, and he was very popular there, so for the British rock guitar players, Django was one of the first guys they heard because their dads were fans of his. Peter Frampton grew up listening to Django. George Harrison—big fan. Mark Knopfler, Hank Marvin, Ritchie Blackmore, Jeff Beck, Jimmy Page—all fans.

Now think about this, Charlie Christian inspired a whole legion of American jazz guitarists, but Django inspired him. Les Paul took the whole pop-guitar thing and was hugely influential. Chet did the same for country. You can trace all that back to Django, but I don't think you can trace it back much further. It sounds corny, but I don't think there would be guitar playing as we know it today had he not done what he did. I think Django was the first guitar hero. ■