Django:
The Life and Music of a Gypsy Legend

Michael Dregni

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Printed in the United States of America
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To Boing-Boing and Bam-Bam

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Like us
you have no king
no set of rules
but you have a mistress:
Music

—Manouche poet Sandra Jayat,
"Django," 1961

Django, il était la musique fait l'homme.

—Emmanuel Soudieux

1

Awakening
1910–1922

He was known as Django, a Gypsy name meaning "I awake." His legal name—the name the gendarmes and border officials entered into their journals as his family crisscrossed Europe in their horsedrawn caravan—was Jean Reinhardt. But when the family brought their travels to a halt alongside a hidden stream or within a safe wood to light their cookfire, they called him only by his Romany name. Even among his fellow Gypsies, "Django" was a strange name, a strong, telegraphic sentence due to its first-person verb construction. It was a name of which Django was exceedingly proud. It bore an immediacy, a sense of life, and a vision of destiny.

He was born in a caravan at a crossroads in the dead of winter. Following the dirt paths and cobblestone roads north from the Midi of France in the fall of 1909, his father, Jean-Eugène Weiss, steered the family's single horse to pull their caravan creaking and swaying onto the wide open plains of Belgium. Here, the land was so flat it gave the impression one could see to the ends of the earth. The wet wind whipped down from the Atlantic unimpeded in its cold fury. Riding on the wind came dark rains that seemed never-ending, turning day into night for months on end until one prayed for even the weakest rays of sun. Reining in his horse, Jean-Eugène brought the family's perennial travels to a halt at the crossroads of Les Quatre Bras. As they had done for countless years past, the family would weather the winter in a rendezvous outside the Belgian village of Liberchies in the southwestern Hainaut region. They camped amid a small troupe of fellow Romanies to huddle through the coldest months alongside the Flache ôs Coûrbôs—the Pond of the Ravens—named for a coven of the black birds that haunted the surrounding trees. With fresh water from a stream and fodder for their horse from the fallow fields, the family settled in as much as they ever settled anywhere.

Jean-Eugène's caravan—called a *vurdon* in Romany and *roulotte* in French—was a typical Gypsy home of the era. The family lived in a wooden box measuring roughly seven feet wide by fourteen feet long and six feet high. This box was mounted atop two axles bearing wooden-spoked wheels. Traces and tack held their single horse while a simple bench supported the driver. At the rear, steps led to the entry door. The typical Romany caravan of the time had small windows on either side letting in daylight; these windows were covered by handcrafted lace curtains—the kind of domestic touch that made a caravan a home. Inside, a cast-iron stove was bolted to the floor; fed on wood and coal, it glowed transparent red in the winter and warmed the whole of the caravan. Across the front end, a bedchamber dominated, surmounting chests of drawers storing belongings, quilts, and blankets. A corner of the caravan was set aside as a shrine with a framed lithograph turned into an object of worship. The image depicting the French Gypsies' patron saint, Sara-la-Kâli, was draped with strands of vari-colored beads and lit by votive candles. Underneath the caravan hung wooden crates containing tarps, tools, water buckets, feed for the horse, and cages for ducks and chickens that might be spirited away from farmsteads along the road. Running the roofline and around the doorway was carved scrollwork painted in the most brilliant golds, scarlets, and indigos possible and shining like a gilt crown on a religious effigy. Within this small home-on-wheels lived the family: Jean-Eugène, his wife Laurence Reinhardt, Jean-Eugène's ten-year-old daughter, and another, younger son, both of whose names have been lost.

Beyond the half-moon rooftop and spindly stovepipe of the family's caravan, the staunch red-brick houses of Liberchies led up to the grand gothic church of Saint-Pierre-de-Liberchies, its heavenward spire towering high over the level countryside. The Belgians said of themselves that they were born with a rock in their stomach to start building their houses, so infatuated were they with their homes and the security of a firm foundation. Now, in wintertime, the solid houses of the 700 inhabitants of Liberchies were warmed by charcoal braziers. Electric radios bringing news of the world and diversion in the dark evenings were winning pride of place on mantels. And around town, the automobile was coming to rule the roads, terrifying Romany horses as the horseless carriages rattled by. The modern world of 1909 had left the Gypsies in its dust.

Still, the arrival of Jean-Eugène's family and their *kumpania*, or traveling clan, of Gypsies was celebrated each autumn by the people of Liberchies with a bazaar organized in their honor, the Kermesse du Fichaux. Swirling with color into the gray of a Belgian fall, the Gypsies sold the jewelry, baskets, and lacework they fashioned as well as wares from their far travels. They told fortunes, unwinding the paths of a life from the tangle of lines on a palm, auguring greatness and love, selling charms to ward off evil. Some specialized in mending wicker chair seats. Others patched copper cooking pots the Belgian village women brought; with a concerto of pounding, a pot could be

made as good as new with metalwork changed little since the armoring of knights. Still other Gypsies traded horses with the farmers, wheeling and dealing, examining teeth for age and hooves for lameness. The Gypsies were known as *maquignons*—literally, horse fakers—who magically dressed up horses for sale, and the farmers looked for their timeless trademark tricks—shoe polish hiding grizzled hair, a diet of water to fill out ribcage staves, a spike of ginger in the anus for spirit. It was all an ages-old exchange between the Gypsies and townspeople of Europe.

Jean-Eugène was *un vannier*—a basketmaker. Yet he also wore other hats, a necessity for survival on the road. Now 27, he was born in 1882, although no one remembered where. In the sole surviving photograph of him, taken in Algeria in 1915, Jean-Eugène looks more like the prosperous mayor of a French city than a traveling Gypsy. His dark hair is combed back from his broad forehead above virile eyebrows and the penetrating eyes that dominate his face. His cheekbones are pronounced, his mouth hidden behind the usual mustache, a symbol of masculinity affected by most Gypsy men as soon as they can cultivate one. Dapper in a dark suit, he appears distinguished and, above all, wise from a lifetime of having seen many things in many lands with those piercing eyes. As the Romany proverb went, He who travels, learns.

Basketmaking was labor Jean-Eugène only did when times were tough. He boasted a special talent: Jean-Eugène was an entertainer, another timeless métier of the Gypsies. He could juggle with the best circus sideshowmen and tease audiences with the mysteries of legerdemain. But Jean-Eugène's pride was in playing music—violin, cymbalom, piano, guitar—and directing a dance orchestra of Romanies. It is this pride that shines in his eyes in the photograph: He is seated at his piano with his band arrayed around him. And while the hands of the musician next to him look like those of a peasant who could be holding a plow as indifferently as they grip his viola, Jean-Eugène's hands are crossed before him in regal manner. Even in this ancient photograph, they look like the fine hands of an artist.

To earn a few francs on the side, Jean-Eugène tuned pianos. He also repaired other musical instruments. He might find a damaged violin at a flea market, barter for it on the cheap, rebuild it, and sell it again down the road. But it was as a musician that he supported his family. He modified the rear of his family's caravan to create a diminutive, canvas-covered traveling theater stage on which he and his wife performed for townsfolk their magical and musical menageries.

Laurence Reinhardt was introduced on the family's stage as *La Belle* Laurence. Among the Romanies and in honor of her dark beauty, Laurence was known as Négros—Spanish for "black." She made jewelry to sell, but she came alive as a dancer. At 24, she was renowned for her ravishing flow of movement, and even in her old age, Négros was moved to dance as soon as the music began. She traded on her exotic tea-toned complexion, raven-black

hair, and tall stature. In a photograph of the time, she is handsome with a masculine strength to her face—a jutting jaw that seems determined even in repose and eyes that look like they feared nothing.

It was on the eve of one of the family's performances in Liberchies that Django was born. The night of Sunday, January 23, 1910, was bitter with cold. The townsfolk gathered for the annual show of Jean-Eugène and his Romany troupe at the inn of Adrien Borsin known familiarly as Chez Borsin. Happy for entertainment as an anodyne against the emptiness of winter, the townsfolk were looking forward to Jean-Eugène's music, the burlesque comedy of his friend Louis Ortica, and the dance of *La Belle* Laurence. But this year, events conspired against the evening.

Négros was in her caravan alongside the Pond of the Ravens, lost in the pains of childbirth.

She had set off on foot to walk into town to perform at Chez Borsin when the contractions began. Jean-Eugène continued on to perform while the Gypsy women ushered Négros back to the camp, lit candles against the darkness, and gathered clean cloths to deliver her first child.

As the distant sound of applause came to them from town, Django was born.

THREE DAYS LATER on January 26, Jean-Eugène and Négros wrapped Django against the cold and set out with their fellow Romanies for the church of Saint-Pierre-de-Liberchies. They filed into the baptistery dressed in their finest suits and most brilliant dresses, fedoras held humbly in hand. Joining the Gypsies were several townspeople, also in their Sunday best. Adrien Borsin stood front and center. He was a stout, rotund man who appeared to enjoy his restaurant's fare to the fullest. At Borsin's side was his sister, Isabelle, a staunch matron with primly trimmed hair. Symbolizing the rare friendship between the Romanies and the townsfolk, the Borsins were serving as Django's sponsors and godparents.

Following the name-giving ceremony and baptism, Jean-Eugène and Négros hosted a celebration for their newborn son. Chez Borsin was alive again with a feast and music. The family's clan of Manouche Gypsies did not celebrate marriages, but a baptism—especially a couple's firstborn—was a grand affair.

Jean-Eugène applied for a birth certificate for his son with the town secretary, Henri Lemens, on January 24. In the exquisite penmanship of a turn-of-the-century bureaucrat, Lemens entered Django's legal name as "Jean Reinhardt." For his part, Jean-Eugène gave his own name as "Jean-Baptiste Reinhard"—an alias to mask him from the French gendarmes who sought him for military conscription—and he signed with the practiced yet unsure hand of an illiterate at the bottom of the birth certificate, "J. B. Reinhard." Lemens ignored the orthography and added a final "t" to the newborn's name, corresponding to the French pronunciation of the Alsatian name.

Such a revision of a Romany's identity was common throughout Europe, a simple yet subtle act of cruelty, a reworking of a person's legal being by an all-powerful border official or bureaucrat. The hegira of Gypsy names began with requirements that Romanies bear Christian given names and family surnames for identification. These random names were chosen by chance during a Gypsy's travels and bore little meaning for their owners; among themselves, they went solely by their Romany names. They adopted surnames of the country in which they lived in a charade of assimilation to mask their Gypsy identity. When they crossed a border or signed a document, officials often transliterated and twisted their legal names in spelling and eventually even in pronunciation. At the same time, Gypsies surreptitiously altered their own surnames as needed, changing their legal identities like they changed their shirts. Jean-Eugène's surname was often written phonetically in France as Vées, and he and his brothers sometimes also hid behind the alias Schmitt when the gendarmes were on their trail. Négros's Alsatian surname of Reinhardt—literally someone from the heart of the Rhineland—was likely chosen for expedience by her ancestors who long lived around Strasbourg in Alsace. By these various forces, Django was registered as Jean Reinhardt.

Django was given the legal name Jean in honor of his father, but it was his Gypsy name that bore his true identity. Gypsies chose a Romany name for their child evoking a physical attribute, such as Baro (Big, or often, First Born), or natural phenomena, including Chata (Shadow) or Zuna (Sun). Animal names served as totems—such as Bero (Bear)—while girls were given flowery names like Fayola (Violet) and Draka (Grape). Names might mirror a child's personality or the parent's hopes, including Grofo (Noble) and Schnuckenack (Glorious Music). Tchavolo or Tchocolo (Boy or Son) and Tchaj (Girl or Daughter) were simple references to the child's sex whereas other names like Bimbam and Boulou were onomatopoeia echoing a baby's babbling.

In naming their firstborn son Django, Négros and Jean-Eugène chose a Romany verb and not a noun or adjective for his name. They saw something special in this child.

AS A YOUTH, Django became a proficient robber of chickens. Among his people, the Romanies believed it a noble skill to trick or steal from the non-Gypsy world around them. It was also a skill that brought curses from non-Gypsies, fostering distrust and ultimately hatred toward Django's people. Yet to the Romanies such thievery was part of survival on the road.

Silence was the key to abducting a chicken. The fowl could not be allowed to alert its owners of its plight. Like most good tricks, it was simple, and was handed down among Gypsies from father to son. As part of a *paguba*, or raiding party, the robber stole up on an unsuspecting hen with coat or cloth held ready. Before the chicken had a chance to rouse its owners with a storm of

clucking, the cloth was dropped over its head. The robber then stuffed the chicken under his arm, twisted its neck with a practiced jerk of the wrist, and disappeared from the farmyard as silently as he arrived.

Django also became an adept trout tickler. Wherever his family traveled, he was drawn to the closest water to fish, casting into the surf along the Midi coast or in country streams. When he lacked a cane pole or tackle, Django poached fish in a technique decried by the gendarmes as *pêcher à la chatouille*, fish tickling. Lying on his stomach in the grasses along a riverbank, he moved his hands in a systematic search along the water bottom until he came upon a fish, his fingers gently tickling the fish's belly to lull and lure it in until he could grasp the silver body and catapult it out of the creek.

Yet the true delicacy of the French Gypsies was the hedgehog, an animal the French would never consider eating. The creature was known affectionately as a *niglo* in Romany, and the Gypsies felt a kinship for this strange little rodent with its prickly hide. The hedgehog lived hidden beneath hedgerows—nether regions no other animal wanted as its home.

Hunting a *niglo* required wiles and a good nose. Romanies trained dogs to track hedgehogs much as pigs were used to root out truffles. Once a dog found its quarry, the hedgehog was chased into a cloth sack and clubbed on the head.

Most Romanies had treasured *niglo* recipes, and Négros no doubt had her own. Hedgehogs have a rich meat, gamy yet delicate, best when caught in autumn when they have put on fat for their winter hibernation. They were cured overnight on a caravan rooftop as it was believed moonglow enhanced flavor. To clean off the quills, Gypsies poked a hole in the hedgehog's hide, then blew into the carcass, inflating it until the skin was taut so the prickles could be easily shaved away. *Niglos* were often cooked on a spit over open flames or stewed in a ragoût. The classic recipe, however, called on Gypsy enterprise and ingredients found along the road to roast the *niglo* in a clay sarcophagus. With its prickles still in place, the hedgehog was sliced open across the belly and gutted, the liver saved as the supreme delicacy. After stuffing the *niglo* with fresh rosemary, thyme, and wild garlic, the Romany cook would stitch up the incision. The hedgehog, prickles and all, was rolled in wet river clay; the resulting soccer ball-sized lump was roasted in a fire's coals for an hour or so. When the clay rang to the rap of a knuckle, the shell was broken open, the hardened clay prying away the prickles. With a prayer of *latcho rhaben*—Romany for *bon appétit*—the hedgehog was feasted on.

For Django, tickling trout and hunting hedgehogs were early lessons in living: The rules of the road required resourcefulness. And the everyday act of stealing a chicken likely opened Django's eyes—in life he could have whatever he wanted as nothing barred him from taking it by any means necessary, whether it was in his Gypsy world or from the larger, foreign world surrounding him.

DJANGO WAS BORN in Belgium by chance, just as he could have been born in France, Italy, or anywhere else on his family's travels. He was sometimes referred to as a Belgian Gypsy, due to his birthplace; as a French Gypsy, as he lived most of his life in France; or even as a German Gypsy as his family came from the Alsace. But nationality was not important. His cultural heritage as a Romany was his sole allegiance.

Django was a Manouche Gypsy. Based on kinship between Romany and Sanskrit, the Gypsies are believed to have originated in India. When Islamic leader Mahmud of Ghazni invaded India in 1001, a defending army was conscripted from lower-caste Indians to battle the Muslims through northern India and into Persia for three decades. From Persia, some of the warriors returned to India, others hired on as mercenaries to new nations or migrated westward. They traveled what became known as the Romany Trail leading into Byzantium and on to Europe, where their arrival was first noted in Serbia in the 1300s. Others moved through North Africa, eventually crossing into Europe via Spain in the 1400s.

Europeans, believing these dark-skinned wanderers came from Egypt, corrupted "Egyptian" into "Gypsy." Through time, they were also christened with a variety of other names. They were called Tziganes for their work as animal traders, known as "athingani" in Byzantium; as Sinti as they were believed to have originated from along the Indian Sind River; or as Manouche from the Romany *manus* and the Sanskrit *manusa*, or "true man." In Spain, they became known as Gitanos, or Gitans in French. Now, many prefer to be known collectively as Roma or Romany, a name derived from their word for "human." The Roma's military heritage has been passed down in their most common term for a non-Gypsy, *gadjo*, or the plural *gadjé*, from a Sanskrit word meaning "civilian" or "non-military person."

The Romany's history was one of persecution. Forced from their homes, they were conscripted by the ruling Aryan caste. Arriving in the Balkans, they were enslaved. In Europe, popular folklore long held that Gypsies wrought the nails to crucify Jesus on the cross, and laws were passed in most European countries to rid them of the perceived Gypsy scourge. Gypsies were first chronicled in France in 1418 with the first expulsion orders following on their heels in 1427. In a 1560 decree, Gypsies were committed to a lifetime of pulling oars in French galleys. Louis XIV directed French bailiffs in 1682 to round up Gypsy men as slaves; the women were to be flogged, then banished. France deported Gypsies to Africa's Mahgreb, Gambia, and Senegal as well as to Louisiana in the New World. While Europeans prided themselves on not having India's social castes, they did have a place for Gypsies—outcasts. Chased away from civilization, the Gypsies became nomadic of necessity rather than desire, a people of the diaspora, without a homeland or a promised land.

The earliest traces of the Reinhardt clan date to the 1700s. Police records note them traveling the Rhine River valley, through the forests of the duchy

of Swabia, and into Switzerland. Three generations of Reinhardts led a dreaded bandit gang terrorizing their namesake Rhineland. Antoine-Alexandre Reinhardt—known as Antoine de la Grave—marauded the region before being captured and executed in Giessen in 1726. His grandson Jacob, better known as Hannikel, bested Antoine's reputation, ruthlessly raiding towns and then retreating into the shadows of the Black Forest. Yet Hannikel too ended his days hanged by the neck with his brother Wenzel at Sulz in 1787. Family lore recalled that Django's grandparents moved from Bavaria to Strasbourg when the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 forced them to flee westward. Wherever they traveled, Django's ancestors carried what mattered with them: The essence of their culture—their language, customs, trades, and music—was portable, always ready for the road. Their history was unwritten, their footsteps blown over with dust almost as soon as they passed by.

On Django's birth certificate, Jean-Eugène listed the family's place of residence as Paris, but their true home was the caravan. It was here that a second son was born to Négros and Jean-Eugène at a campsite on the outskirts of Paris on March 1, 1912. Named Joseph Reinhardt, he was known to all as Nin-Nin, a common Romany diminutive and term of endearment. A daughter soon followed, named Sara for the patron saint, yet called Tsanga—literally, the Pincher, describing her role in tussles with her elder brothers. With Jean-Eugène's two children from a previous marriage and his and Négros's three young ones, the family continued their travels, their single horse pulling the caravan at a slow trudge to the horizon.

In 1915 when Django was five years old, Jean-Eugène quit his family. A French Gypsy proverb advised, Love your horse more than your wife; she may leave you without warning, but a good horse never will. Now, Négros was the one left behind with the family's horse.

Divorce and abandonment were rare among the Manouche. Yet Jean-Eugène had an earlier wife, the mother of his elder daughter and son, although no one remembers what became of her. Now, when Jean-Eugène deserted Négros, she was stranded with Django, Nin-Nin, and Sara to raise without a father.

Jean-Eugène's abandonment left a hole in Django's life. The family crossed paths with Jean-Eugène at various times over the coming years in Algiers and Paris, but he never returned to live with his wife and children. Négros was forced to support them by weaving baskets, caning chair seats, and crafting jewelry. Her specialty was bracelets made from spent artillery shellcasings collected on the battlefield of the Marne following World War I. She taught Django to dig the shells out of the trenchworks, washing away the earth to uncover the brass that was cut into bangles, engraved with designs, and sold to keep the family fed.

With Jean-Eugène gone, Négros took the horse's reins and steered the caravan in a regular route following the seasons and the opportunities they brought to survive. When the narcissuses bloomed and the swallows returned to swirl above the rooftops of Paris, she led her family to the French Midi or further south into Italy. Here, she sold her bracelets to flush summer visitors on the Mediterranean. As the fields of lavender blossoms faded in the Midi, signaling the arrival of autumn and the end of the lucrative tourist season, the family made its way north to Paris. In winter, Négros and her brood returned to the hospitality of Liberchies to wait out the cold.

For the festival days of May 24 and 25, Négros shepherded her children on a pilgrimage to Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer on the far tip of the Rhône delta along the Camargue coast. This was the barren land of wild white horses and *gardian* cowboys, salt marshes and stone towns struggling to hold on in a harsh realm. The family parked among the fields of caravans of Manouche and Gitans from across Europe. Négros and her children paid homage to the Gypsies's adopted Saint Sara during a week of devotion and music. During their travels, the Romanies assimilated Catholicism into their lives, sometimes blending it with their Hindu beliefs, sometimes supplanting them. Whereas the Catholic *gadjé* celebrated the town's two namesake saints—Sainte-Marie-Jacobé and Sainte-Marie-Salomé, the aunts of Jesus—the Gypsies honored their bastard Saint Sara. According to orthodox legend, Sara was the servant of the two Saintes-Marie, accompanying them after the Crucifixion when they were cast out of Palestine by the Romans in a boat with no oars only to wash up on the shores of France. Gypsy mythology, however, held that Sara was a Provençal Gitane who saved the Saintes-Marie when their boat capsized in a storm off the Camargue. The effigies of the two Maries stood in honor in the consecrated chapel of the fortified medieval church Notre-Dame-de-la-Mer. But Négros guided her children past them to descend stone stairs into a crypt where a wooden statue of Sara waited; she was relegated to this chamber as she was not a true saint recognized by the Vatican and beatified only by the Romanies. Django entered this grotto blackened by the candles of generations of devotees to bow down before the dark-skinned statue of Sara, known in Romany as Sara-la-Kâli, or Black Sara. Négros then presented her children for Sara's mute benediction or proffered a child's photograph among the numerous other alms and ex-voto medallions attesting to miracles rendered, left behind by countless Romanies through time in tribute to Sara's powers. If the Reinhardt family wished to give special thanks, they stitched an ornate robe to drape over the statue, which was blanketed by dozens of such robes by the pilgrimage's end. Following their homage, the Gypsies carried the statue of Sara on their shoulders to be purified in the saltwater of the sea.

With the coming of winter, Négros turned her horse again toward Belgium. In Liberchies, she and her children were welcomed back, but without

the money from Jean-Eugène's music, their caravan stood out for its dilapidated state. Django and Nin-Nin made friends among the Belgian boys, and Nin-Nin attended the town's school for three years for a few months at a time. But despite Négros's attempts, Django bore no interest in school. He seemed impatient with the confines of youth, yearning to break free. Over the years, Django attended school at haphazard intervals, preferring to escape to explore the countryside, drink coffee with the Gypsy men in bars, and shoot billiards. His was a life lived purely for the moment.

When World War I broke out, Négros and her children abandoned their caravan outside Paris to flee on foot among the refugees evacuating eastern France. They walked for weeks along the roadside, Négros leading her sons and daughter, carrying the belongings they could shoulder, accepting rides in wagons when offered, marching along at a child's pace when there was no other choice. They eventually reached the Midi, then continued along the coast to the Italian port of Livorno. They found berths on a boat for Corsica, then boarded another ship bound for Algeria.

Perched above the Barbary Coast, Algiers was known as the White City for its whitewashed buildings that blinded the eye in the African sun. By contrast, Algiers's casbah was a world of brilliant color with market stalls wandering in a labyrinth around the fort and the Grand Mosque Jamaa-el-Kebir's minaret. This was the Arab quarter, but it was also home to Muslim Xorax Gypsies as well as Afrikaya Gypsies—Manouche who had emigrated or been cast out of France long before. Négros found rooms neighboring the casbah to sell her baskets and jewelry. And it was here, among other Gypsies from their troupe, that they again encountered Jean-Eugène, leading his orchestra for dances and spare change.

In 1920 when the war had ended and Django was ten years old, Négros brought her family back to Paris and the caravan they had abandoned among the Romany encampments encircling the capital. Beyond shifting between campsites around Paris, the family was settled for the first time in Django's life.

Paris was a changed world. The city had been a diamond aglow in the glitter of *la Belle Époque*. Now, following the war to end all wars, France was in a state of shock. To forget the horrors, Paris threw itself full fury into *les années folles*—the crazy years—of high living and fresh fads, casting out the old and dashing like a bayonet charge into the future. It was part self-induced amnesia, part anesthesia. Paris resurrected itself as a city of a new era in art, music, and literature. It was the modern world's capital, the city of the new century, boasting a métro and sewers and clean drinking water for all. And with the arrival of municipal electrification and Georges Claude's artificial rainbow of neon, the glories of Paris could now be witnessed day and night, earning the city a new nickname—the City of Light.

Paris was still protected by its ring of medieval ramparts, and it was here on the doorsteps of the city that Django's family lived. Outside the fortifications, the city's glory came to a dead end. Surrounding Paris was a vast nether region known as *la Zone*. Here, outside the City of Light, was a city of blight: It was in *la Zone* that Paris's cesspool cleaners dumped their waste each night and here as well that the human refuse of the city found refuge. This was not the Paris of broad boulevards, monuments, and cathedrals. Instead, whole cities of shantytowns crowded the fortification ports like beggars holding out their hands for the smallest offering. The ramshackle hovels crafted from cast-off boards and stone rubble were homes to the dispossessed. The inhabitants of *la Zone* were known derisively by Parisians as *les zonards*—and many feared the Gypsies as the worst vermin among them.

The Manouche and Gitans parked their caravans in *la Zone* where they could find streamwater along the lost river of Paris, *la Bièvre*, and it was here that Négros brought Django and her other children and settled in among their clan. These Gypsy camps of *la Zone* were described by French poet Serge:

> Down there in the Gypsy camp a guitar juggles with a popular melody. One can hear distant dance music, dizzying waltzes, the sweetness of an accordion. Campfires are everywhere, each with its own cooking pot. Chickens are stewing and guitars going wild. Heavy, gray clouds roll over *la Porte de Clignancourt*, leaving behind a drizzling rain. One flounders in the rutted roadways of molasses-like mud, in the small lakes and quagmires, on this slope where stands the camp of the Manouche, an immense assembly of caravans, *vurdons*, and *roulottes*, making *la Zone* a colorful puzzle of an itinerant city of more than five hundred vehicles parked side by side in crazy disorder. At night, the five hundred *roulottes* sparkle like oriental palaces. And through it all comes a song—brutal, sordid, flowing onward, with a plaintive cry for *la Zone*, where enchantment itself may perhaps be hidden, somewhere in the rottenness.

Négros and the other Gypsies favored campsites in *la Zone* near their livelihoods in the flea markets. They moved between encampments outside the Porte de Choisy or Porte d'Italie on the southeastern side of Paris near the Kremlin-Bicêtre flea market and their beloved horsetrading market at the Vaugirard galleries; Porte de Montreuil and its endless thieves' market to the east; and Porte de Clignancourt to the north with its vast *marché aux puces de Saint-Ouen*. Each weekend, Négros led her children to these markets blossoming out of the mud of *la Zone* and named in honor of the fleas that inhabited the upholstery of the old furniture and rags for sale. She hawked her wares amid the glorious anarchy of the markets.

La Zone became Django's world. He lead a gang of Gypsy boys that proudly called themselves *les Foulards rouges*, or Red Scarves, a symbol of the Parisian working class. Django's gang fearlessly stole pears from the walled orchard of the Saint-Hippolyte priory, sweet juice dripping down their faces as they ate

the forbidden fruit. Ambushing an enemy gang's leader, known to all as Le Grand Loucheur, or Big Cross-Eyes, Django stood tall before him and demanded in his best outlaw growl, "Your money or your life!" Le Grand Loucheur chose to leave Django flat on his back with a black eye. Other days, they tried to derail trams on the avenue d'Italie, jamming the rails with iron bolts stolen from the nearby Panhard factory, praying with religious fervor for a spectacular crash. When the horsedrawn wagons slowed to a crawl to climb the hill on avenue des Gobelins, Django and his gang spirited away coal to resell. Often the brothers gathered scrap metal in wheelbarrows to barter to foundries. One day, they found a boxing ring erected at a café on the avenue d'Italie. Invited to take their turn, Django and Nin-Nin pummeled each other while the locals threw coins to spur them on. The brothers, battered and unsteady on their feet, walked away with their arms about each other's shoulders and their pockets full.

Négros tried once more to send Django to school. A traveling classroom for Gypsy children was organized by a former teacher known as *père* Guillon. Forced to retire early due to his fondness for red wine, Guillon started his own school in *la Zone* in a converted bus. But Django and the other Gypsy children, used to their freedom in *la Zone*, had little regard for the authority of this *gadjo* dipsomaniac. Django preferred school in the streets and cinema.

Even as a youth, Django was a fool for games and gambling. He would wager on anything, anywhere—cards, dice, and especially, billiards. With his winnings, Django sometimes treated himself and Nin-Nin to a movie. Or better yet, they found a way around buying tickets. Django was drawn to the cinema like an innocent to the inferno. At the grand Luxor movie palace in Barbès, Django and Nin-Nin were regular gate-crashers. The afternoon matinee featured two films, separated by an intermission when the audience mingled in the lobby to buy treats. Django and Nin-Nin slid in among the crowd to watch the second feature, and their ploy worked well for weeks until one day when Le Luxor held a showing for a nearby school. Among the freshly scrubbed and uniformed schoolchildren, the two grubby Gypsy boys were easy marks and the cinema manager collared them. But he struck a deal with Django and Nin-Nin: If they set up the movie posters in front and performed odd jobs around the cinema, he would grant them gratis admission. With their modest labor complete, Django and Nin-Nin found seats and roared with laughter at the antics of Charlie Chaplin. They thrilled to cliffhanger serials and for 90 minutes lived the life of pirates sailing before the wind, dreaming of crossing rapiers with D'Artagnan against Richelieu's guards and hiding their faces in horror as Fântomas hatched his nefarious plots. From the cinema, Django learned how to walk with a gangster's swagger. He learned of honor among thieves and the codes of chivalry. And he learned how to tilt his fedora over one eye just so.

The earliest known photograph of Django, taken in 1920 when he was ten, captured him with a group of other Gypsies, including the fierce Négros.

Django wears a bedraggled suit with a carelessly crooked tie and that jauntily tilted fedora, many sizes larger than his head. While the others in the photo look down to the ground or off into the distance with feigned interest, only Django looks back out of the image straight into the eye of the camera, self-assurance radiating from his impossibly dark eyes, defiance in their depths.

On his lips is an infinitely mischievous smile.

THEN THERE WAS THE MUSIC. Melodies played on cymbaloms, banjos and guitars, harps and pianos, and above all, violins. Throughout his childhood, Django was surrounded by music. His father and mother fashioned a livelihood from music and dancing. At Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, music went hand in hand with religious homage, Manouche violinists playing their songs influenced by Eastern European Tzigane traditions while the Spanish Gitans strummed out guitar-fueled flamenco. In the Parisian flea markets, Gypsies offered melodies on violins and banjos in exchange for spare coins. And around the Romany campfires wherever they were lit, music accompanied family events, from baptisms to funerals. For the Manouches and Gitans, music was as intrinsic to life as air.

Jean-Eugène continued to lead his dance orchestra. He had seven brothers, all musicians, including pianist Nellone and multi-instrumentalist Guiligou, proficient on violin, banjo, and guitar. In the 1915 photograph of Jean-Eugène, his band—wearing fezzes for the occasion—comprised two violinists, a bassist, and two guitarists, one holding a twin-necked harp guitar, in addition to Jean-Eugène's piano. This was an ambitious orchestra for the day. It was rare to have a piano in a traveling Gypsy band, but Jean-Eugène heroically hauled the upright along in his caravan during his journeys. Django's sister Sara remembered their father's band playing smart hotels in Paris and along the Côte d'Azur as well as in the open-air dancing pavilions known as *guinguettes* along the River Marne outside the capital at La Varenne-Saint-Hilaire. Sara sometimes accompanied her father's violin on piano, their repertoire including popular songs, light opera airs, early one-steps, classic Chopin waltzes, and Gypsy melodies as well as the *Czardas* of Vittorio Monti and the *Sérènade* of Frantisek Drdla.

Django's first instrument was the violin. The classic instrument of Romany musicians due to its portability, it was ideal for the anguished sounds of popular Gypsy violinists Jean Goulesco and Georges Boulanger. Django learned the instrument from his father, his uncle Guiligou, or other relatives in the call-and-response teaching style common among Romanies: An elder taught a child the melody and chords to a song, painstakingly displaying the fingerings and patiently playing the song over until the child knew it by heart. According to family lore, Django learned much of his musical skill under his

uncle Guiligou's tutelage, and Sara remembered Django playing violin with his father's ensemble when he was between the ages of 7 and 12.

When he was ten years old, Django came upon his cousin Gabriel playing a battered banjo. Django was enthralled by the instrument and the melodies Gabriel picked out. He may have learned the rudiments of banjo from Gabriel, copying his cousin's fingerings and following his melodies on the instrument. With these songs in his head, Django begged his mother for a banjo of his own. Négros laughed off this request as a child's whim—and moreover, she did not have the 50 francs for an instrument. It was not until Django was 12 that he received a banjo, given to him by a Manouche acquaintance named Raclot, who understood the boy's fascination for music. Raclot's gift to Django was a diminutive banjo-guitar, a common instrument of the day featuring a banjo resonator coupled to a six-string guitar neck. This banjo-guitar became Django's focus. He strained to teach his awkward fingers to follow the melody lines that he had a near-magical skill for remembering after hearing them only once or twice. Forcing his right hand into the arcane shapes of chords stretched across the fretboard, he played until his fingertips glowed red—and then beyond, building thick calluses of skin that could suddenly split open on the unforgiving steel strings and coat the frets with his blood. Django was inventive in finding items to use as picks—the tip of a spoon, a sewing thimble of his mother's, a two-sous piece, and a bit of whalebone that once served as a shirt-collar stiffener all found new use in his hands. Django played the melodies he learned from his father and tidbits like the old French children's song "Au Clair de la Lune" as well as the soldiers' favored dirty song, "La Madelon," an ode to a barmaid of fairy-tale beauty far from the horror of the trenches. Django carried his banjo-guitar with him everywhere through the day and cradled it in his arms as he slept. Négros remembered him plucking at his instrument until his fingers ached: "Once, when I returned to our caravan, I found him with the tips of his fingers all red and swollen. I thought that he had five whitlows at one time." On another day, teacher *père* Guillon came to the caravan in search of his errant pupil only to find Django plucking at his banjo. "Is that what prevents you from learning to read?" the teacher asked. In answer, Django only bowed his head and played his banjo harder than ever.

Witnessing Django's growing skill, Négros bought a real guitar for her son after selling a necklace of faux pearls in the Clignancourt market. Cousin Gabriel taught Django how to chord it, and they set up to perform on street corners. Django soon found another accompanist in a banjo-playing hunchback named Lagardère, and together they ventured into Paris to play their duets. Their music sounded so good to their ears that they continued to roam the city with their instruments for three days. Finally realizing how much time had passed and what his mother's response was going to be, Django chose to stay safely by Lagardère's side instead of returning to his caravan. Négros, meanwhile, was in a panic. She scoured the city for her son, even

taking the bold step for a Gypsy of notifying the police of her missing child. She finally found him at 3 A.M. playing his banjo in a café in the place d'Italie. The beating Django received terrified his accompanist: "That's your mother?" Lagardère asked. "I would say instead that she's a panther." The repentant Django could not reply—he was begging Négros for mercy.

On weekends, Django often made the journey to the Porte de Clignancourt and a dance hall called Chez Clodoche. Amid the bustle of white-aproned waiters and the clatter of diners, Django stood silent in a remote corner to listen as his father and uncles played their music. When other Romany waifs were chased out like flies by the exasperated waiters, Django darted beneath a table, keeping attuned both to the arrival of the waiters' footsteps and the sounds of the band. He was particularly impressed by his uncle Guiligou's guitarwork. Concentrating on remembering how he fretted his instrument and the melodies played, Django repeated the fingerings on his own guitar back home. Then, one day, his uncle found Django hiding and at the same time watching him with rapt attention. Guiligou asked Django if he could play guitar, to which he proudly nodded. Guiligou proffered his own guitar and asked for a song. Django took up the guitar, playing not just a few chords but picking out the intricacies of a melody. Guiligou was astonished. He grabbed his brothers and directed Django to play his song again for the full audience. Soon, Django was serving his apprenticeship on the banjo, playing alongside his father and Guiligou at Chez Clodoche each Saturday.

There was another Romany guitarist in *la Zone* whom Django also sought to emulate. He was a Gitan named Auguste "Gusti" Malha. Short and round, Malha was the sort of unremarkable man one passed on a Parisian street without noticing as he picked your pocket. Yet Malha put his nimble fingers to better—if less-profitable—use. Malha was a virtuoso who picked the strings as if he had six fingers on each hand. He first won renown at 14 in Brussels alternating with equal aplomb between guitar and banduria, a Spanish mandolin with flat back and six strings doubled in their tunings. In Paris, Malha played alongside the dance hall accordionists, his many gem-encrusted rings flashing in the spotlight, a symbol of success to Django.

Django also learned from the Gitan virtuoso Poulette Castro. Poulette was a rarity among the Parisian Gypsies for he could read music and played in the pit orchestra at Paris's Théâtre du Châtelet accompanying the opera divas. Having traveled throughout Europe and even England, he boasted a great repertoire of waltzes, traditional songs, and Gypsy melodies. For generations after, "*le grand* Gitan" was summoned forth in stories told by Romany musicians, his music surviving to haunt the melodies composed by his followers.

Poulette performed alongside his brother Laro Castro, a wizard of the banduria. The Castro brothers also played in the ensemble Le Quatuor à Plectre—the Plectrum Quartet—joined by two other Gitan musicians, Coco and Serrani Garcia. Le Quatuor à Plectre was recorded accompanying singer

Rosita Barrios on a variety of gay Spanish songs then the rage of Paris. The all-string ensemble featured instruments of various timbres, doubling up on the melody lines to create an enchanting multilayered sound highlighted by trills and tremolos.

Django likely learned the genesis of his right-hand technique from Poulette while watching the Gitan in Clignancourt cafés. Poulette taught Django to play in a style similar to Spanish *flamencos* without resting his right hand on the guitar's soundboard. Again like a *flamenco*, Poulette and others instructed Django to bend his wrist almost perpendicular to the strings, keeping his wrist loose and supple for quick strumming. Therefore, to reach different strings, Django moved not with his wrist but from his elbow. Yet instead of strumming the strings with his fingernails as a *flamenco*, Poulette taught Django to use a plectrum for increased volume.

It was this technique that the 12-year-old Django used in playing his banjo with his whalebone plectrum. Nin-Nin, imitating his elder brother, also learned banjo, and starting a tradition that would last for decades, served as Django's accompanist. Together, they wandered Paris from the medieval passageways of *la Mouffe* to working-class Ménilmontant, past the windmills of Montmartre to the belly of Paris in the food markets of Les Halles. They busked for coins at the *marché aux puces* at the Porte de Montreuil, or set up to play for laborers drinking their after-work beers in the cafés encircling the place d'Italie. Everywhere they went, they played their banjos, passing their battered borsalinos around to collect the proffered sous when the song was done.

One day, Django was picking his banjo at a café near the Porte d'Italie called À la Route de Dijon. Another Gypsy in the bar—a tall, thin Italian Zingaro with a head of rich dark curls like a black sheep's fleece—listened as Django played Johann Strauss's "Blue Danube." This Italian Gypsy heard something special in the boy's picking, and he introduced himself. His name was Vétese Guérino; Django may have heard of him for he played accordion in the dance halls of all Paris. If Django was willing, Guérino offered to hire him as an accompanist for the princely sum of ten francs a night.

2

Panam
1922–1928

BEFORE HE COULD MAKE HIS DEBUT with Vétese Guérino, Django had to ask permission of his mother. He was only 12, but he was in a hurry to grow up. Despite Négros's ruling hand, Django roamed *la Zone* at will, venturing far and wide throughout Paris, armed with just his banjo. All the while, Négros spent her days peddling her basketry and jewelry in the flea markets. In the past, Django's drive to play his instrument led him to wander away for days on end. Playing in Guérino's band, Négros would know his whereabouts during the night hours. The allure of a second income in the family may also have been enticing—especially the riches Guérino promised. So, with Négros's approval, Django set off with his banjo-guitar to accompany the accordionist in the dance halls of Paris.

He was a slender, small Gypsy youth overshadowed by the size of this diminutive banjo. Yet entering the dance hall, Django crossed the threshold to adulthood. His skill with a banjo was recognized by established, professional musicians and he was accepted among them.

Django was being paid for playing his banjo, rewarded for his skills and talent. With the same banjo his mother bought for him, he earned money for her, paying her back many times over as a provider for the family. He never believed himself ordinary; he had faith in his own talents, and now others too saw something special in him. Django's joy at this recognition was overflowing.

Django had also entered into the *gadjo*'s world. This was a large realm beyond the comforts of his family's small caravan, one strange and unforgiving, with new rules, a different language. Django grew up on the tattered edges of this world, tricking and conniving against it. He had been the outsider, the pariah. But now no longer was he that Gypsy waif with his infernal banjo shooed away by waiters from the cafés. He was accepted into the *gadjo*

world—or at least a small corner of it. For a Gypsy boy, this must have been another awakening.

In the few surviving photographs of Django from this time, he has traveled far from the rapscallion of youth. In an age-stained studio portrait from 1923 or 1924, Django looks composed and confident. He is now dressed with care, perhaps because this photograph was taken in a studio, or maybe because it reflected a new sense of self. Guérino bought him a stylish suit and a new banjo-guitar, replacing his ragged coat and battered banjo of the past. This neat, dark suit actually appears to fit Django, and his hair is combed back from his brow with an exquisite, practiced hand. The collar of his shirt is carefully turned down, a collar pin holding his well-knotted tie high for all the world to see in the dandy's style of the day. He stares back into the camera without averting his eyes as if it's a dare for a duel. On his face is a look of such defiant pride that he seems almost disdainful, even haughty.

Yet this portrait is as much of his new banjo-guitar as it is of Django. He holds the instrument front and center and it fills the middle of the frame. The banjo seems too large for the boy, and although it looks like a quaint child's toy, a plaything precious and cute, that is obviously not how Django thinks of the instrument. His whole being is intent on the banjo: his legs crossed to support it, his back bent forward to play, his arms enveloping it. Django grips this banjo like a weapon—a weapon with which to wage war for his ambitions.

MUSETTE WAS AN UNIQUE EXPRESSION of a place, a people, and a period. Jazz was born in New Orleans, the blues in the Mississippi Delta, the tango in Buenos Aires, flamenco in Sevilla, fado in Lisbon. Paris gave birth to musette.

Musette originally referred to a type of bagpipe, but it soon became the name for a music. The hailed king of the pipes was Antoine "Bousca" Bouscatel. Born in 1867 in the Cantal region of the French Auvergne, he received his first pipes when he was eight years old. Bouscatel spent his days alone in the Auvergnat alps tending his family's cows and goats and teaching himself to play. It was this music of a goatherd that Bouscatel brought to Paris.

He arrived in the capital in 1890 when he was 23. Like many Auvergnat farmhands, he came to Paris seeking a better life, part of a wave of immigration from the Auvergne. Bouscatel settled in what were then the fringes of the city in *la Roquette*, the Faubourg Saint-Antoine near where the old Bastille once stood, far from the grand boulevards and Opéra. The neighborhood was known in Auvergnat argot as *la Bastoche*, and it became a veritable village of the Auvergne transplanted into the heart of Paris.

The Auvergnats arrived on the city streets like poor country cousins. They vended coal for heating during winter and transported water year round for drinking and bathing, carrying the buckets as beasts of burden at the ends of wooden beams straddling their shoulders like oxen yokes. They stood out amid the Parisians, dressed in their regional clothes of flowing blue blouses

known as *biaudes*, broad-brimmed black felt hats, and brilliant red scarves knotted at the neck, their arrival heralded by the clack of their wooden clogs on the cobblestones. Yet the Auvergnats soon won the grudging respect of Paris for their drive and desire to get ahead; Honoré de Balzac created a caricature of the thrifty, industrious Auvergnat immigrant in his wheeler-dealer Rémonencq in *Le Cousin Pons* of 1848, who "thirsted for gold like the devils in hell thirst for the dew of paradise." Many Auvergnats graduated to establish cafés that sold wine instead of water, yet still offered good black Auvergnat coal to heat people's homes.

The cafés became a center of Auvergnat life in Paris. They were simple inns, without the brasswork and Art Nouveau finery of an Alsatian brasserie or the fanfare that doubled as ambiance in a bistro. They typically had no tables or chairs and boasted just a bar—a wooden counter if times were tough or a true zinc bar when they were good. Many of the proprietors also played the musette, and when the wine so moved them, they could be induced to pump up their bagpipes and play a song of the old days. Others hired musicians such as Bouscatel and invited friends on Sundays to dance the Auvergnat 3/4-time *bourrée*. These balls were private family affairs, a respite from the work week, a small taste of the dew of paradise in the limbo of the big city.

The musette's song could soon be heard five nights a week as full-time dance halls were established known as *bals musette*. By 1880, there were some 150 dance halls in Paris's working-class neighborhoods. In November 1890, *Le Figaro* reported in an amused if somewhat panicked tone that there seemed to be a *bal musette* in every Auvergnat shop in Paris.

Bouscatel was working during the day as a boilermaker and coppersmith, common work among Auvergnats. But when night descended, he packed up his musette and set out to play. He honed his crude country style and no longer sounded like a goatherd: Recordings of Bouscatel display a musician able to coax enchanting sounds from his crude instrument and play rousing *bourrées* that kept the good times alive. By 1903, Bouscatel was the star of a small bistro named Au Chalet, crowded in between scrap-metal dealers' shops and groceries on the street known to all as the Auvergnat heaven on Earth, rue de Lappe.

Rue de Lappe was a plain, ugly street, a mongrel of a Parisian boulevard, but whatever charm it lacked during daytime was made up for by its bewitching allure at night when the street came alive. While upper-class Paris promenaded along the Champs-Élysées, the Auvergnat boilermakers let off steam here. The short street shot straight from rue de la Roquette to rue de Charonne and was wide enough for just one cart to pass—usually the gendarmes' Black Maria. The factory workers and neighborhood toughs arrived in droves with the darkness, jostling each other to gain entrance, twirling around the dance floor with the shop girls, and settling their grievances with switchblades. As dawn finally arrived, rue de Lappe woke each day in a bed of litter and broken glass, gray-faced with a hangover and grieving the morning after—but with no regrets and ready to do it all again as soon as the grace of darkness descended.

It was on rue de Lappe that Bouscatel was crowned the king of the musette. He gave up his day job to perform through the nights, and by 1910, Au Chalet was in Bouscatel's hands and renamed Chez Bouscatel. Over the years, Bouscatel expanded his *bal* into a grand dance hall. He appeared each evening still wearing his *biaude* blouse, felt hat, and red scarf, symbols of Auvergnat tradition applauded by his crowds, even though they had traded their old farm wear for work clothes suited to the factories. Bouscatel also still cultivated a grand moustache in the best Auvergnat style. Like many pipers, he wore on his ankles bracelets of bells with which he kept time and provided his own simple accompaniment. Often, he played solo. Other times, he led a trio of a violin and hurdy-gurdy. With a shout of "*Hé les enfants!*" Bouscatel pumped up the red-velvet-covered airbag with his right arm, blew into the mouthpiece, and the night began.

THE MELODY of the bagpipe's song was soon to be interrupted. By the late 1800s, another wave of immigrants began arriving in Paris—Italians—bringing their own musical instrument, the accordion. This robotic kin of the bagpipes was a complete band in a box, and the Italians played their own traditional songs and light opera airs with a sound that waltzed from sad to sweet and back again.

An accordionist first climbed up on the dais of a Parisian *bal* to play for the dancers in 1879. The instrument was new to the dance halls and people flocked to hear the novel sounds. The accordion was dramatically more flexible than the pipes, capable of stretching to numerous octaves, painting a wider palette of tones, and playing numerous styles of music and emotions. To win jobs in the *bals* and displace the pipers, the Italian accordionists belted bells to their ankles and adopted the Auvergnat repertoire as if it were their own.

The pipers rose up against this threat to their livelihood and patrimony. In an outraged panic, a piper dashed off a call to arms to an Auvergnat newspaper: "Death to these foreign squeezeboxes that are good only to make bears dance, but absolutely unworthy to start the legs of our charming women of Cantal in to dancing." Heeding the cry, pipers organized in 1895 a fraternal union with Bouscatel at its head. The war was on.

Prominent among the Italian accordionists was Charles Péguri. He was the eldest son of Félix Péguri, who left his native Piedmont for Marseille in 1872 before venturing to Paris in 1890 to open an atelier fabricating and repairing accordions. Félix had three sons, all of whom became accordionists—Charles, Michel, and Louis. Like his father, Charles was both an accordion maker and player, yet he held grander ambitions. In 1905, in the midst of the war between the pipers and accordionists, Charles packed up his accordion to introduce himself to the piper's king, Bouscatel.

Chez Bouscatel was alive that night with Auvergnats dancing to Bouscatel's music. Péguri stood in the shadows, his accordion hidden at his feet, awaiting

a break in the songs. When Bouscatel exchanged his pipes for something cool to drink, Péguri hoisted his own instrument and approached the dais. His greeting in Italian-inflected French won a cold eye from Bouscatel, but Péguri introduced himself. Bouscatel responded with a curt dismissal: He needed no accompanist as the bells on his ankles provided all the band he required. But Péguri continued, stating proudly that he was an accordionist. Bouscatel's ire rose at this impertinence. Onlookers remembered his condemnation: "It's strange, that machine. You make music with it?" Bouscatel sneered. But he had likely already admitted to himself that the accordion boasted qualities his simple pipes lacked. He asked Péguri to play for him, and from the first notes, onlookers remember Bouscatel's eyes became eloquent, at once sad and yet impressed. Finally, he set down his drink, climbed onto the stage next to Péguri, and pumped up his pipes to join in. They began their song, playing side by side, bagpipes and accordion in harmony. The duet won over the dancers, who gathered up partners and swung across the floor. When the music came to an end, they demanded more from a pleased Bouscatel and relieved Péguri. With the people's response to their song, Bouscatel hired Péguri to accompany him at Chez Bouscatel. It was a truce in the war between pipers and accordionists. It was also the beginning of a new music.

Although the union between bagpipes and accordion may only have been a marriage of convenience, it was followed by a marriage of love. On May 27, 1913, Charles Péguri wed Bouscatel's daughter. Like a strategic medieval marriage between heads of state, the king of the bagpipes was now forever linked with the new king of the accordion.

Yet even though he accepted the accordion into his hallowed dance hall, Bouscatel was uneasy about this upstart. Sharing a drink late one night after the *bal* was quiet, Bouscatel and his hurdy-gurdy player, Baptiste, bemoaned the arrival of the accordion. Bouscatel pronounced a funeral elegy for his musette: "The days of my bagpipes are numbered, and those of your hurdy-gurdy too! This character with his accordion carries with him our ruin! . . . The accordion is a miracle that falls from the sky. It is a revolution on the way. Did you hear? It is complete, it is hot, it is alive. And it is a whole orchestra, this instrument of the devil! It takes the breath out of you, this accordion of Satan. Listen well to what is conspiring against Bouscatel. It is fate. And when I am dead, people will still be dancing on rue de Lappe."

By the time Bouscatel died in 1945, his premonition had come true. The musette was playing its swan song in the *bals* by the mid 1910s; the accordion had joined in, played supporting harmony, and then quickly took center stage to play the melody in the halo of the spotlight. In the wake of Bouscatel and the other pipers, the music the accordionists now played—whether it was *bourrées*, Italian airs, or a unique and growing repertoire of *bals* favorites—became known simply as musette. The Auvergnat bagpipes had given their name to the music that replaced them.

MUSETTE EVOLVED into a sophisticated form of music in the 1910s and 1920s primarily at the hands of one man, accordionist Émile "Mimile" Vacher. There were other accomplished accordionists following Charles Péguri during this era—players such as Louis and Michel Péguri, Émile Prud'homme, Joseph Colombo, Adolphe DePrince, Medard Ferrero, Marceau Verschueren, Jean Vaissade, and Fredo Gardoni. But it was Vacher who synthesized the traditions of Bouscatel and Péguri to pioneer almost single handedly the music of musette.

Vacher grew up to the sound of an accordion. Born May 7, 1883, in Tours, he was brought to Paris by his mother when he was an infant. In the capital, his mother moved in with an accordionist named Louis-Paul Vacher. Émile fell under the music's spell, begging for lessons, and soon accompanying his adoptive father in a duo. In 1898, when Émile was just 15 years old, the two began playing dance halls, and in 1910, the Vacher family purchased the Bal de la Montagne Sainte-Geneviève in *la Mouffe*. Here, in the medieval passages of the Rive Gauche, where the ancient rue Mouffetard joined rue de la Montagne Sainte-Geneviève in the shadow of the Panthéon, the Vacher's *bal* became the humble cathedral of musette.

Émile Vacher grew into a paternal-looking man, befitting his role as the father of musette. He was a husky person with an ample supply of chins. With hands the size of hams and fingers like plump sausages, he made even his monstrous accordion seem diminutive as he gripped the box and rocked the bellows. Vacher drew such an enchanting sound from his accordion one onlooker reported that his music sent women into ecstasy.

Vacher commanded a wide repertoire of music. Along with the *bourrées*, he unreeled popular quadrilles, polkas, mazurkas, Spanish paso dobles, and maxixes from Rio de Janeiro; the tango, foxtrot, cakewalk, biguine, rumba, and *le shimmy* were fashionably late arrivals on the scene. He also composed accordion waltzes that became known as *valses musette*. These waltzes were breezy tunes that swept the dancers into their gay sound. Their mechanics were largely standardized: a major-key A section theme followed by a B section that led back to the melody line.

In addition, Vacher played the java, a dance that became the pride of musette. Legend held that the java got its name at Le Rat Mort, a grand *bal* reigning over place Pigalle in Paris's red-light district. Here, the women were infatuated with the 3/4-time Italian mazurka "Rosina" that they danced in quick, minced steps with their hands planted on their partners' derrières. Throughout the nights, the dancers demanded the band play "Rosina," calling out for encores, "*Ca va?*" which in the Auvergnat accent came across as "*Cha va?*" Paris woke one morning and a new dance had been born. Yet the debut of a new dance was contentious. Some staunchly Auvergnat *bals* bore signs proclaiming "The java is forbidden." Others cursed the java: Louis Péguri said the java was "a dance derived from the waltz but with a step that was de-

bauched and vulgar." Others decried it succinctly as a *mazurka massacrée*, whereas Parisian novelist Francis Carco summed up all bal dancing, stating, "Here, dance is not an art." Art or not, the dancers begged for encores, and Vacher hurried to compose fast-paced javas for his fans.

At his dance hall, Vacher's band was also changing with the times. One evening, his band included an awkward little drum kit played by Vacher's adopted father. This addition to the traditional musette sound was inspired by the hot new jazz music arriving in France with the American Army bands of World War I. Almost overnight, drums replaced the piper's bracelet of bells, giving the music a percussive drive and modern rhythmic movement. The musette drum kit was quaint, consisting of just three components—kick bass, snare drum, cymbal—and was fittingly known in musette argot as *un jazz*.

Another strange instrument soon also appeared at Vacher's side. The banjo arrived, like the drum kit, via America in the hands of jazz-band and minstrel-show musicians. Three different types came into vogue—the elfin banjo-mandolin, four-string tenor, and six-string banjo-guitar. Vacher adopted it as the ideal accompaniment to the accordion with its percussive sound like a drum, harmonic chords like a harp, or bass lines of a string bass. And it was blessed with a sharp volume and trebly tone that cut through the accordion's powerful voice.

THE FIRST NOTES from a banjo in a dance hall may have been shocking, but Vacher's next move created more waves—both in the immediate and long term. Appearing at his side was a Gypsy, a banjo player known as Mattéo Garcia. The music of the Auvergnat pipers had been usurped by Italian accordionists, then charged by the earliest American hot jazz. Now, a new influence to musette arrived in the person of Garcia, who opened the door for other Gypsy musicians and their musical sensibilities.

Little is known of Mattéo Garcia. He was likely related to Coco and Serrani Garcia, the bandmates of Poulette Castro. He played his music in the 1910s and 1920s; by 1921, he was accompanying Vacher at the most notorious of all *bals musette*, Au Petit Jardin. Yet no photos remain, no recordings survive. Garcia remains a shadowy figure, his story lost to the wastelands of *la Zone*.

Garcia was the composer of "Minch valse," his sole surviving composition, yet it was a singular masterwork that built his fame as the godfather of a distinguished style of *valse musette* known as the *valse manouche* for its Gypsy composers. The melody of Garcia's "Minch valse" was borne on rippling arpeggios running in ascending melodic lines. The title of this rhapsody, however, had a jocular, base background that was straight off the dirty floors of the dance halls. *Minch* was vulgar Romany slang for "cunt."

Garcia was soon joined by Gusti Malha. Inheriting Garcia's chair as Vacher's accompanist, Malha was prized as an accompanist due to his lightning-fast

fingers and trustworthy rhythm chording. But there was something more to his music. Even though he was musically illiterate like most Romanies of the day, Malha added what the accordionists called *passion rabouine*—Gypsy passion—to their sound. Thus, his services were vied for among the bandleaders—including Michel and Louis Péguri, Gardoni, and Albert Carrara—who jealously stole him away from each other like the spoils of a never-ending musical war.

Whereas Garcia's legacy rests on just the one waltz that became by forfeit his masterpiece, Malha was prolific. But beyond numerous simple melodies, Malha was the uncredited composer of the quintessential "Reine de musette," and herein lay a tale indicative of the place of the Gypsies in both the *bals* and the *gadjo* world at large.

"Reine de musette" is a romance in musical miniature. The melody is sweetly nostalgic like the remembrance of an old love. Then the B section arrives on a note of trepidation like a lover's spat, before the song resolves itself in the crescendo of a warm embrace. After composing the waltz, Malha sold it for 40 francs to pianist Jean Peyronnin, who played alongside him in Vacher's band. Peyronnin required a sixth composition bearing his name to become a member of the vaunted Société des Auteurs, Compositeurs et Éditeurs de Musique (SACEM). This organization was a sort of union and musical old boys club that copyrighted songs; being a member was both an honor and a necessity to work your way up in the music world. The tale of "Reine de musette" tells of the outsider nature of the Romany musician: Here was Malha, one of the best known and most prolific of Gypsies, and even though he himself boasted enough compositions to join SACEM, he steered clear of the musical establishment. Malha aided a Frenchman in gaining SACEM membership and paid no heed to possibly ephemeral royalties from publication and other musicians' recordings of the song. For himself, he took his payment up front in money he could count.

Among his compositions, Malha remains most famous for his classic "La valse des niglos," a jewel of a minor-key waltz building on the legacy of Garcia's "Minch valse." These pioneering waltzes of Garcia and Malha display a distinctive style showing the hand of a banjo player as composer rather than an accordionist, with melody lines that fall readily under the fingers on a banjo-guitar neck. Lacking the accordion player's ability to sustain notes, the guitarists instead filled the air with furious flurries of sound, ornamenting the melodic lines with triplets and tremolos, virtuosity impressive to the Gypsies. Garcia and Malha incorporated elements of the accordionists' playing into their waltzes, especially in the roller coaster melodies of ascending and descending arpeggios and chromatic runs. This character of musette melody came from the right-hand button "keyboard" favored by accordionists of the day as the sensible layout made rapid two- or three-octave arpeggios a simple dash for the fingers across the buttons. Vacher and others used these arpeggios liberally in composition and ornamentation, and Garcia and Malha wholeheartedly adopted this style to their banjos.