

Stephane Grappelli: Biography of a Jazz Legend

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It is hard to believe that the world's greatest jazz swing violinist hardly had more than four years of professional music education. Stephane Grappelli was born with an innate sense of harmony and rhythm. To watch Stephane play is to witness a miracle. He played violin for 77 years, and each time he wore a smile on his face and never conveyed a sense of apprehension. Those that would come to know and appreciate his music would comment on how Stephane could not play an unpleasant phrase even if he tried (*Stephane Grappelli: A Life in the Jazz Century*). Grappelli's style evokes tender lyricism and vivacious swing creating a unique sound which crowns him one of the living legends of jazz in the world.

Born in 1908 in the district of Montmartre in Paris to an Italian father and a French mother, Stefano Grappelli would have a full life to look forward to, void of regrets and filled with the joy of music. But Stefano would not come to know the joy of music for another thirteen years; in the meantime he would come to know loss, tragedy, and how to dance. At the age of four his mother died and his father was forced to join the army in order to support himself and his son. Stefano was sent to Isadora Duncan's school of dance to reside and study the arts. He remained there until the outbreak of World War I when Isadora's school was converted to a hospital and she fled to America (*Stephane Grappelli: A Life in the Jazz Century*). Stefano would live the next few years in poverty on the streets of France and in and out of orphanages until his father returned home after the war. Upon returning from the war his father dragged Stefano to city hall and had him nationalized as a Frenchman; Stefano became Stephane (Dregni 71).

In 1920 Stephane and his father moved into a one room attic where his father taught Italian lessons to support the two. Shortly after returning from war, his father gave Stephane his first violin and in no time he was busking in the square at Montmartre. Amazingly Stephane taught himself to play with no professional training and was soon offered a job playing with a singer-guitarist in a restaurant in the square (*Stephane Grappelli: A Life in the Jazz Century*). Stephane's father enrolled him in the Paris

Conservatoire Nationale where he studied harmony, solfeggio and ear-training; his first exposure to music education (Dregni 71).

In 1923 his father remarried and moved out of Paris; Stephane decided to stay behind and at age 15 he was on his own. At this time French cinemas were playing silent movies with live music. Stephane started playing in the cinema and joined the music union; his membership would last until 1977 when he would renew it for another half a century. During this time Stephane would frequent a small café with an American style jukebox. He always played his favorite tune “Tea for Two” until one day when he accidentally pushed the wrong button. The song he heard instead was a jazz tune by Mitchell’s Jazz Kings; he was fascinated and awestruck by the sound (*Stephane Grappelli: A Life in the Jazz Century*).

In 1928 he was playing with a French orchestra at the Ambassador when he heard jazz violinist Joe Venuti and guitarist Eddie Lang’s performance. This was his official introduction to jazz violin. Soon after meeting Venuti he met George Gershwin and jazz would forever be a part of his life (*Stephane Grappelli: A Life in the Jazz Century*).

In addition to playing violin Stephane also experimented with piano and saxophone. Stephane was a huge fan and admirer of Art Tatum and kept a painting of his hero above his piano in his home in Paris later in life. In the late 1920’s Stephane joined the big show band Gregor and the Gregorians. He started as the pianist but once Gregor heard he could play violin he was encouraged to switch instruments. Stephane preferred to play violin because he could sit back and take breaks, whereas the pianist has to constantly play (*Stephane Grappelli: A Life in the Jazz Century*).

After Gregor’s death in 1930 the former Gregorians were reconfigured into a true jazz band and played the popular hot spot in France, Le Croix du Sud. One night in 1931 Stephane noticed an audience member who appeared as an unsavory character. Stephane described the man: “You would rather have

said he was a gangster straight out of an American film. He had skin the color of *café au lait* and greasy hair, back as coal. His upper lip was topped by a thin black moustache in the shape of a circumflex. He really didn't inspire confidence." He of course was speaking of Django Reinhardt, gypsy guitarist. Django invited Stephane back to his caravan where they played for hours. Both were obliged to other bands and went their separate ways (Dregni 74).

Three years later their paths would cross at the Hotel Claridge; this would be the birth place of the hot club sound. It all began with a broken string. Stephane was hired by Louis Vola to play in a dance band for the hotel, Django also played in the band. Stephane recalls the story:

"One day, just before we were due to go on, a string broke on my violin. I put on a new one, but couldn't tune my instrument properly because the tango band was still playing and drowned out any other sound. So, I withdrew behind the curtain where Django and Louis Vola were waiting for our stint. I tuned my violin and at the same time improvised a chorus that just passed through my head. This music seemed to impress Django because he took his guitar and accompanied my improvisation" (Dregni 69-70) .

The duo would team up with two rhythm guitars and a bass to form the Quintette du Hot Club de France. The combo would play swingin' versions of old standards as well as over 45 original tunes. Stephane and Django co wrote 37 songs for the hot club, some of which are still considered standards today (Peters 3).

Upon formation of the Quintette du Hot Club de France (QHCF) the band sought out a place to record their sound. Most record companies turned them away for sounding "too modern" or not having any brass instruments. Finally Ultraphone agreed to a contract for 500 francs. The band recorded four tunes; among them were "Lady Be Good" and "Tiger Rag". When British impresario Lew Grade first heard QHCF he remarked, "When I heard Stephane play, it was a revelation to me...Django Reinhardt of course absolutely shocked me. There was no doubt in my mind he was the best guitarist in the world...together they were a remarkable team." Lew immediately offered them a tour of England. A contract was written up and Stephane acted as the businessman for the band. Before meeting with Lew,

Stephane and Django agreed that Steph would read over the contract first and then hand it to Django, who was illiterate, but would pretend to read and accept the contract. During an interview with Paul Balmer, Stephane recalls the story and tells how Django randomly pointed to a statement in the contract and blurted out, "This is not acceptable!" He was pointing to the part that covered all their travel in first class accommodations. Stephane quickly told Django under his breath to "be quiet you idiot!" All went well and they were booked as the headliner in England and according to Lew Grade were "an absolute sensation" (*Stephane Grappelli: A Life in the Jazz Century*).

The QHCF toured England three times as well as Spain with saxophonist Benny Carter. The combo would cross paths with numerous jazz musicians visiting Paris. They played and recorded with greats such as Coleman Hawkins, Eddie South, Larry Adler, Rex Stewart, Barney Bigard, Bill Coleman and Dicky Wells (Peters 3). The band was running smoothly until September 1939, the start of the war. Django immediately left England to return to France and the rest of the band quickly dispersed. Stephane was devastated but decided to remain in England. He hooked up with blind pianist George Shearing and played with his combo for seven years. During the war they played much patriotic and supportive music for England's patrons and servicemen. Stephane recalls playing in a nightclub during a blitz. The band members were the only ones left in the club because the bombing was literally right outside. When Stephane asked if they could quit playing, the manager replied, "Absolutely not, England will never die!" So the band continued to play while bombs were bursting all around them (*Stephane Grappelli: A Life in the Jazz Century*).

In 1946 Django returned to England and he and Stephane reunited and reformed the QHCF. They recorded the French National Anthem in order to celebrate the end of the war. The new QHCF had younger rhythm players but Stephane and Django were still the leaders of the combo (*Stephane Grappelli: A Life in the Jazz Century*). They continued to record through 1948. The new QHCF was not as popular as the original and soon Django would start experimenting with new jazz sounds such as bebop

(Dregni 244). Django eventually left Europe to play with Duke Ellington and while in America he mastered the new electric guitar. Stephane also experimented back in Europe with the electric violin; but unlike Django, Stephane preferred to remain acoustic. He again attempted to expand his music education and started taking professional violin lessons. He soon quit because he felt it was too constraining and hindered his playing (*Stephane Grappelli: A Life in the Jazz Century*).

In 1953 tragedy struck when Django Reinhardt had a stroke and passed away. When asked about Django several years later during an interview for a documentary, Stephane replied, "If I had a friend in my life, it was him." Although the two only made music together for seven years it would survive the test of time and remain a unique and extraordinary popular sound that can still be heard today. Django's wife gave Stephane the silk scarf that Django had used as a boy and Stephan would wrap his violin in the scarf until the end of his days (*Stephane Grappelli: : A Life in the Jazz Century*).

The 1950's was a confusing time for swing musicians with the popularity of Rock and Roll and the new jazz sounds of Cool, Hardbop, and Bebop. Stephane was quoted as saying "Bebop is no place for a violin." But he didn't let anything stop him from playing. He played with pianist Teddy Wilson as well as Duke Ellington who he met in a Paris Hotel. Stephane would later recall Duke and comment: "I am terribly proud to know him. He is a very kind person." Stephane recorded the album *Duke Ellington's Jazz Violin Session* with Svend Asmussen on viola and Ray Nance on violin, as well as pianist Billy Strayhorn. Unfortunately he never received a copy of the album and never got to hear the recording session. In 1954 he was named "best violinist" by Melody Maker, UK's popular jazz newspaper (*Stephane Grappelli: A Life in the Jazz Century*).

In the late 1960's Stephane came to America and attended the Newport Jazz Festival where he met Miles Davis. Miles encouraged Stephane to record a Cool Jazz album with vibraphonist Gary Burton entitled *Jazz Encounter* on which they played a Miles Davis composition called "Blue in Green". After returning to the UK Stephane appeared on the Michael Parkinson Talk Show. The host decided to

showcase two of his favorite musicians even though they were from different musical backgrounds and genres: Stephane Grappelli the great jazz violinist, and Yehudi Menuhin the classical violin virtuoso. At first Stephane's reaction was, "I cannot play, I am a fiddle player. " And Yehudi was so intimidated by the improvisational skills of Stephane that he committed his part to memory. In the end they played together an amazing version of the tango tune "Jealousy". The two would grow to become lifelong friends and proceed to do many more recordings together. Yehudi would always be intrigued by the ease of which Stephane played. Yehudi would comment several times on the natural talent that resided within Stephane and was quoted as saying, "He [Stephane] picks up his violin in the most nonchalant way, as if it were part of his body" (*Stephane Grappelli: A Life in the Jazz Century*).

Stephane continued to wow the masses and gained the honor of playing for her royal highness the Queen of England. He also was given a prized spot of the popular radio show *Desert Island Discs* where celebrities are asked to pick seven albums to take with them if stranded on a desert island. Amongst Stephane's picks were Debussy, Louis Armstrong, Art Tatum, Eddie Lang, and Bix Beiderbecke.

Since Django's death in 1953 Stephane had steered clear of playing with any other guitarists. During the 1970's Stephane was approached by guitarist Diz Disley and asked to play at the Cambridge Festival. It was the first time in twenty years that he played with an all string band. It would be the beginning of a great revival of string jazz music. Stephane toured the world with Diz and sold out venues from Australia to America from 1976-1979. He was in his seventies and just hitting his stride. For his 70th birthday he was the honored guest on *This is Your Life*, a television program where the guest was presented their past life and accomplishments through a narrative (*Stephane Grappelli: A Life in the Jazz Century*).

In 1979 Stephane would join forces with up and coming jazz guitarist and Django enthusiast Martin Taylor. The thing that amazed Martin was that Stephane always loved the present and lived in the moment and that he was never afraid to try new sounds or styles while remaining true to his own

personal swing sound. When Martin began playing with Steph he asked if there was any advice that he could give a young jazz musician. Stephane's reply was, "Start well and end well, the middle will look after itself" (*Stephane Grappelli: A Life in the Jazz Century*).

Stephane Grappelli toured well into the 1990's and played with a variety of musicians over his lifetime. Documentary maker Paul Balmer sums it up nicely: "Musical collaboration formed a huge part of Stephane's career; crossing continents and musical divides. " Musicians such as Yehudi Menuhin, Dave Brubeck, Dr. L Subramaniam, Miles Davis, Yo Yo Ma, Oscar Peterson, and Duke Ellington (to name a few) all had the pleasure of knowing and playing with the greatest jazz violinist in the world. At the end of Balmer's documentary Stephane ends the interview by stating, "At the last moment I will go without regret and I leave the regrets to my friends. C'est la vie" (*Stephane Grappelli: A Life in the Jazz Century*).

Stephane Grappelli died in 1997 at the age of 89. He left the world well over 100 recordings of his incredible and intangible swing sound (www.rollingstone.com). His discography spans over several pages all filled with memories and friendships that were forged over the fires of a hot jazz legend. Stephane's sound and his memory live on and are honored on a daily basis by such bands as The Hot Club of Cowtown, and The Hot Club of San Francisco; almost every major city in the U.S. has a string jazz band that can attribute their popularity to the man who started it all with a broken string.

Works Cited

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