

Gypsy King

A
Private
Lesson
With

Biréli Lagrène

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Photography by Justin Borucki

What's a dominant chord?" said Biréli Lagrène, the Gypsy jazz virtuoso, when I asked him to play something over a dominant chord. "Are you kidding?" I asked. "No, seriously, what's a dominant chord?" he said.

This reaction is probably surprising, as we guitarists tend to obsess over labels and rules—what

chord is that, and what scale can I play over it?—often to the point where we're not being mindful of what's most important: how something *sounds*. You see, when theory dictates practice, at least in bluesy idioms like jazz and rock, bad things happen. Namely, people make unexciting music.

On the other hand, exciting music often gets made without regard to theory. Robert Johnson, Paul McCartney, Nigel Tufnel: none even read music. And Lagrène, who



Tracks 51-59
ON THE CD



GUITAR SCHOOL

learned how to play guitar from listening to Django Reinhardt records and playing with other musicians, developed his flashy modern style unencumbered by the rigidity of theory.

After he mastered Reinhardt's style—which he did by age 10—Lagrène switched from acoustic guitar to electric and got into fusion, which he also learned by ear. But lately he's been reexamining his acoustic roots. On his most recent recording, *Move* (Dreyfus), Lagrène, with his Gypsy Project—co-guitarist Hono Winterstein, saxophonist Franck Wolf, and bassist Diego Imbert—plays some tunes made popular by Reinhardt in the 1930s. Throughout, Lagrène plays impossibly nimble lines governed not by strict adherence to modes or scales but by ear and intuition, as evidenced by his confusion over the term “dominant chord.”

“Oh, that,” said Lagrène after I played him an A7 chord. Then he busted out a lick of surpassing grace and agility. When learning that lick and others here, pay attention more to the sound than to the nerdy nomenclature. Oh, and do your best to keep up.

Let's start off with some of your chords. A lot of Gypsy chords come from Django Reinhardt, who had to use special grips since his fret-hand fingers were injured in a fire. So, a lot of my chords use only two or three fret-hand fingers. Here are some of my typical voicings in the key of G major [Fig. 1].

Guitars like this [a *Maccaferri-style steel-string acoustic—Ed.*] demand to be played strongly, so I use a lot of power in my right hand and strum with my wrist bent slightly. A forceful attack is needed to make the guitar sound good. Of course, I tend to break a lot of strings.

Do those sort of voicings work in a variety of contexts? Yes. Here's a blues example in C. [Bars 1–8 are shown in Fig. 2.]

How about a single-note blues example? Here's one that's also in C, with both single notes and chords [Fig. 3].

How would you explain your picking technique? I don't have really a system—it depends mostly on the context. When I play slowly, I use a lot of downstrokes; that makes for a really good, confident sound. When I play faster, I do whatever feels natural, often with both upstrokes and downstrokes.

Can you show us some Django-style lines? Here's a nice one with arpeggios, in the key of G, that has a G chord going up and an A minor chord going down [Fig. 4]. A

Fig. 1 Track 51

Moderately

G⁷ D^b7 D7 E^b7 G B^bm6 Am7 E^b9 D9

Fig. 2 Track 52

Moderately Fast

C6 B6 C6 A^b G6 A^b7 G7

*T = thumb on 6th str.

C6 F9 C G^b9

Fig. 3 Track 53

Moderately Fast

C9#11 G^b7

F7 C7

Fig. 4 Track 54

Moderately Fast

G Am7^b5 G

Harm.



cool thing about the key of G is that there are lots of natural harmonics available, like the one I played there at the 12th fret. Here's another big one, also in G, with lots of vibrato and some notes that are outside the key [Fig. 5]. And this is a typical Django line that goes down the scale and uses a lot of pull-offs [Fig. 6].

How do you use these materials in your own style? I'm always afraid of getting into clichés, but I know that people like to hear things that they recognize, so I try to find a balance between playing old and new lines. To mix things up, I'll sometimes start with a Django-style arpeggio, and then go into my own style, which is more modern [Fig. 7]. Onstage, I find that having a foundation of the traditional materials and a grasp of the fretboard allows me to take risks; I can play things that I haven't tried before, and that's where the excitement comes in [Fig. 8].


That was some cool sweep picking. Can you play an example over a dominant chord? Here's an example that has a very "outside" sound. In each group of four notes, I go up, up, up, down. The key here is to make sure that the notes don't run together; you want to be able to hear each one clearly [Fig. 9]. I hope that Frank Gambale doesn't check this out. 

Fig. 5 Track 55  

Moderately
G

Fig. 6 Track 56  

Moderately
G

Fig. 7 Track 57  

Moderately Fast
G Bm7b5 E7 Am7

D7 Gmaj9

Fig. 8 Track 58  

Moderately Fast
G

Fig. 9 Track 59  

Fast
A7
Sva

V---I etc.