

THE 22nd. DJANGO REINHARDT FESTIVAL

Ile du Berceau

SAMOIS SUR SEINE 22/ 23/ 24 June 2001.

By Dan Morgan

I first attended the Samois Festival some 14 years ago. It was a humbling experience for someone who had been struggling with the guitar man and boy for over 40 years. The Sunday afternoon session was dominated by the appearance of the Stochelo Rosenberg Trio. Stochelo said it all. His command of the instrument was so complete and his phrasing so fluent that it was difficult to believe that this Dutch kid was barely out of his teens. In some cases he played the original Django solos effortlessly note for note, then went on to prove that he wasn't a mere copyist by going on to build his own completely new and mind-blowing improvisations.

I'd heard that it was not unusual for promising gipsy kids to learn the Django solos early on, but that didn't make this phenomenon any easier to swallow. By the time the session was over I found myself seriously considering whether it wasn't time to take up something comparatively simple like brain surgery.

Faced with a shock like that the victim has two choices – to be either discouraged or inspired. Back in the UK I had a sticky few weeks where my fingers just wouldn't seem to work properly. I became obsessed with the clumsiness of my own playing as compared with the easy facility of Stochelo. Maybe it was a natural stubbornness that gradually enabled me to come to terms with the idea that although I would never *be* Stochelo Rosenberg I could at least work to improve on the technique I already had. It was a slow process, of course, but in the long run the experience only served to increase my dedication to the Manouche style. For the next ten years, along with hundreds of other addicts. I was to make my way back to Samois, eager for my annual shot of inspiration.

This June the old magic was just as strong. I was there again, after an enforced absence of two years, and so, by happy coincidence was Stochelo. The truth is that Samois is not *just* a festival, it's a state of

mind. It's guitar player's heaven, where you're completely immersed in the sound of Gipsy Jazz twenty-four hours a day. During the week there are always several informal jam sessions to be heard or joined in on the banks of the Seine and in the campsites. One night a few years ago on the old Samoï site I went to bed at 3 am. listening happily to the sound of a nearby session. When I woke up at 7 am. they were still playing. That's okay by me. I just can't get enough of it.

I'm not going to labour the historical bit about Django, except to say that for all of us who love Gipsy guitar he is the founding father. He influenced Jazz on a worldwide level through his Hot Club de France recordings in the 1930s. Django was not the first player in the Guitar Manouche style of course, but his uniquely forceful personality combined with more than a touch of genius that has resulted in the style being forever dominated by his name. For years well-intentioned members of the audience have been coming up to me and saying : " You play just like Django." My standard reply to that one is to say: " Thanks for the compliment, but do go back and listen to the real thing."

In the late forties Django settled in Samoï, a beautiful and normally tranquil little town on the bank of the Seine. After many years of being the biggest name in European Jazz he was able to indulge in his other pleasures of painting, fishing and the odd glass of pastis. Yes, Virginia, that was in the golden age, when booze and smoking were considered de *rigueur* for all musos. Today we're too worried about our driving licences to drink on the job and the only people I know who smoke are brass players.

A plaque outside his old cottage records that Django died in Samoï in 1953 at the age of 42. That seems pretty young by our standards, but they were crowded years and he made over a thousand records during his playing career.

The festival traditionally begins on the last Friday in June, but I made a special effort to arrive on the Tuesday. My idea was to book in early at the campsite at Samoreau, on the other side of the Seine. Most of us used to go to a larger site at Samoï, but Gallic local politics being what they are this has been closed for refurbishment for the last five years. It was supposed to be re-opening this year – but it didn't. None of the old hands were really surprised. Although the Samoreau site is very pleasant, it is far too small to cope comfortably with the annual invasion of Djangophiles. The place was already bulging with guitar toting enthusiasts when I arrived. *C'est la vie*. What's a few days inconvenience in comparison with the riches I knew to be in store?

On the Wednesday night there was a concert *en bateau* – on a barge moored on the waterfront near Chez Fernand, the café that was

Django's favourite watering hole. Admission to the barge was 50 fr. – a fiver – and for that we got one free drink and an evening of superb music. First on was a very good Trad band, but the main course for us was a Manouche group featuring Jean Claude Labat, a phenomenal accordionist.

Playing with Jean Claude was one of my personal heroes Patrick Saussois. I'd heard him perform a number of times and thanks to the informal surroundings of the barge I got to meet personally. He turned out to be a nice, approachable guy, and he was tickled pink when I told him that we play his composition *Alma Sinti* (Gipsy Soul) on most of our sessions. Patrick is a left-hander with a difference – his guitar is strung in the normal manner with the bass strings at the top, but he plays it upside down. This is a mite confusing for any guitar player watching with the idea of finding out how he produces such beautiful music. The fingers of his right hand just don't move in the same patterns as those of a conventional player.

Naturally we went to the barge again on the Thursday night. The first group was excellent. The lead guitar had a good technique and tone and played several originals as well as standards. An added charge to the rhythmic pulse of the outfit was the Arab bass player who played in an original slap, percussive style.

Unfortunately the second half was a bit of a let down. The lead played a Maccaferri type guitar, but he was using a Stimer pickup, which produced a typically gross sound. Django used a Stimer for a time when he moved onto amplification and even he sounded lousy in comparison with his acoustic tone. To make matters worse, this guy was playing at maximum volume, completely overpowering the rhythm playing of Mito Loeffler an Alsace gipsy whom I had heard before several times. In short, the session was all I dislike about that kind of thing – over amplified and over-clever, with the lead intent on getting all his pet licks in whether they fitted or not. Well, you can't win them all...

Friday morning Keith organised a group booking, which meant that a 3 day ticket for the festival cost us only 255 fr. each, a saving of about £7. off the already reasonable price. Keith doesn't travel light, by the way. He usually arrives in a big van from which he produces several tents, a full-sized fridge and a rather splendid hi fi set-up, plus an ornate chandelier which provides lighting for the main tent. Now there's a guy who is organised.

First act on the island that evening were the Alessio Menconi Trio (two guitars and bass) who gave us their own version of a number of Django compositions. Nice, not over-exciting stuff but very tasteful. The big deal for me was the Susie Arioli Swing Band, a young French-

Canadian group with the same line-up as my own version of Hot Club – Maccaferri guitar, Gibson semi, string bass and Susie herself providing the vocals and a gentle rhythmic push with brushes on a snare drum. They played standards from the 30's and 40's with such immaculate style and taste that the audience were entranced. Lovely stuff, and I've got the CD to prove it.

The Raphael Fays Trio gave the final session. I had heard Fays at Samois before, several years ago and was impressed by the virtuosity of his technique. Unfortunately he now seems to have gone completely over the top. The major part of his performance was all flashy technique and very little substance. Complete over-kill! It happens to these guys sometimes and it's always sad. They don't seem to realise that just because you can play a thousand notes a minute, you don't have to do it all the time. More important, they forget the most important ingredient of any musical performance – good taste.

Saturday evening started off with the Maire-Ange Martin Quartet – guitar, sax/clarinet, bass and drums. Marie-Ange is a fine guitar player somewhat in the Emily Remler mould and the rest of the group were more than competent. They played a kind of easy listening bop that got a bit samey after the first few numbers. Wallpaper music, but beautifully played.

Next came Basily Jazz from Belgium. This was the real thing as far as we Manouche lovers are concerned. 4 guitars, bass and violin – plus a pianist, who was very good but appeared to have wandered into the wrong session. I mean, who needs a piano when you've got four guitars pumping out a Hot Club type rhythm? That little moan over – they were excellent. Tucsy Basily, the violinist, had a good tone and ideas and Popy Basily, the lead guitar, was a first class player in the Manouche tradition. They played a selection of the HCQ repertoire and varied the mix with several Hungarian and Spanish pieces. An added bonus was a guest appearance by the trumpet playing Limberger uncle, who performed his usual party pieces Yeux Noires and Sweet Georgia Brown.

I gave Michel Herr's European Quintet a miss and walked back to the van for some tomato salad and Camembert washed down by the remains of a bottle of Beaujolais that was lurking in the fridge. Made my way back after for the Stochelo Rosenberg and Romane session scheduled for 9 p.m. Obviously this was an event I was looking forward to – me and about ten thousand other people!

The prog appeared to be running over half an hour late for some reason and I had to stand through a lot of Marta Mus and her trio. Marta is very decorative and quite a good singer – a long haired blonde with a

good figure and wearing one of those long, clinging off-the-shoulder dresses in bright red – a touch of the Marilyn Monroes. However her singing was not in the same class as Susie Arioli and she seemed to go on and on until she finally ground to a halt.

Now for the Stochelo and Romane session. By this point the auditorium area was seething. People sitting in the aisles and standing all around – including me. The grandstand at the back was looking frankly dangerous and I had visions of a possible collapse which would have been a disaster. Personally I was getting a bit sick of being jostled in the standing crowd when there were a number of empty seats ‘reserved’ by people for friends or relatives who appeared to have emigrated. I’ve never seen so many people at the festival. Too many, in fact. It seems to me that the committee must give serious thought to a way expanding the seating arrangements. If not, the event may be in danger of becoming a victim of its own success.

The audience was becoming restive at that point because it took the sound engineers ages to set up the Stochelo/Romane session. Remember they weren’t dealing here with twelve piece band - just two guitars, for God’s sake ! But after all the faffing about they *still didn’t get it right !* As soon as the session started it was obvious to anyone with half an ear that Stochelo was too loud and Romane barely audible. And it went on like that, with the sound men doing nothing about it ! I stood it for the first three numbers, which would have been marvellous, if they’d got the bloody balance right, then frustrated and claustrophobic I decided to make do with the CD. At least that should be properly balanced.

The Sunday afternoon session began with the Weiss and Mayer duo – bass and guitar, both excellent mature players. The bass player was also a versatile vocalist, doing all kinds of unusual effects and the guitarist pumped out a tremendous rhythm and solos. The sound so full it was difficult to believe that it was being produced by only two people. At least the engineers didn’t manage to cock that one up.

Next on were Helmut Nieberle and Cordes Sauvages. I knew Nieberle as a good guitarist from his previous duo appearances with Kagere. The rest of the group were all excellent – particularly the clarinet who a Jack Nicholson's lookalike. He had a nice smooth clarinet tone a bit like BG and his phrasing in the duet passages with Nieberle’s guitar was faultless. Immaculately swinging, and easy to listen to jazz with no rough edges. It had been one of the best Samois Festivals I have ever attended, but there was more to come...

Back at the campsite I was shocked to hear from John Levoi that three of Patrick Saussois’ guitars had been stolen over the weekend.. Dupont, the luthier, who was exhibiting on the island, lost three instruments as well. Most incredible of all, Gerard, of Django’s Mangoes, had his string bass stolen. If you’d ever seen that particular

bass you'd know why I was surprised. It's painted in black with yellow stripes. How do you dispose of such a unique instrument? John was rightly perturbed by these events. He had over £6,000 of his own beautifully crafted instruments with him and you can't take chances with that kind of money. Campsites and the atmosphere of the festival in general depend to a large extent on trust and this kind of thing leaves a bad taste in the mouth to say the least.

It was a downbeat ending to what had been a great festival. My head still echoing with the sound of Guitares Manouches I got away before 9 am. the following morning to spend the second part of my holiday browsing my way up the coast of Normandy towards Calais. *Bon appetit!* No doubt by Monday evening Samois and the Samoreau campsite had returned to their normal state of tranquility.