

Los Angeles, California

The Hot Club of Detroit at Café Metropol

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By Melissa Berry

The Hot Club of Detroit is a five member jazz ensemble based in Detroit, Michigan, but a couple of Saturdays ago at Café Metropol in Downtown Los Angeles, they belonged to us, and we to them unequivocally. Composed of lead guitar, rhythm guitar, bass, saxaphones, and a button accordion, who knew, upon first sight, what to expect. Well, always expect the unexpected. Their bio says they specialize in performing the repertoire of Django Reinhardt in the Manush 'Gypsy' string-band jazz style. For the uninitiated, Django Reinhardt was one of the first prominent European jazz musicians, and remains one of the most renowned jazz guitarists. With violinist Stéphane Grappelli, Reinhardt cofounded the Quintette du Hot Club de France; that explains the choice of name - The Hot Club of Detroit. And, we could expect to hear some of Reinhardt's music. We heard much more than that.



This wonderful evening was an eclectic mix of Reinhardt, Tex Beneke, a saxophonist who played a major role in establishing the trademark Glenn Miller sound as one of the most successful inventions of the big band era, a little Brecht, a little Weill, some Stravinsky dissonance, all melded together with the perspective of 21st

century musicians who present it with an inordinate amount of talent, creativity, and reverence.

Perri, the group's founder and lead guitarist, is a Detroit native who credits his jazz-guitarist father as providing him a solid grounding in the straight-ahead tradition. When he was 17, his father bought him a Fender Stratocaster, and his college guitar professor pointed him to the music of Django Reinhardt. "People say you catch the Django bug and never get rid of it," claims Perri. And for him that's true.

Perri formed the first incarnation of The Hot Club of Detroit in 2003, which now consists of him on lead guitar, Carl Cafagna on saxophones, Paul Brady on rhythm guitar, Andrew Kratzat on bass, and Julien Labro on button accordion. Yes, button accordion. This isn't some accordion that is a refugee from a Polish polka band. This is a very unique type of accordion where the melody-side keyboard consists of a series of buttons rather than piano-style keys. This means buttons at both ends. Labro sat on a folding chair with it strapped to his chest like an infant in a snuggle pack

and caressed it as he took it on all sorts of musical adventures with the rest of the quintet, and we never knowing where it would take us.

The musicians' rapport allowed them to explore myriad possibilities of communication between their instruments; sometimes echoic, then sometimes a dialogue that turned into a conversation. Just when you thought you had your foot on what was being played, there would be some genuine sounding Klezmer music thrown in by Carl Cafagna on one of his saxaphones. Perri's guitar solos had his fingers effortlessly dancing over the neck of his guitar urged on by Paul Brady on rhythm guitar, and Andrew Kratzat on bass. Their set consisted of music that exemplifies the musical diversity that seems to be a current musical trend which focuses on the groups a unique sound while interpreting Brazilian and Latin music, gypsy music, hard core jazz, French street music, jazz waltzes, and even a Chopin Prelude thrown in as on the current CD. This evening's set also included tributes to Reinhardt and Stephane Grapelli with the performances of several of their signature pieces or works written in their honor.

It was a wonderful, intimate evening of being "up close and personal" with The Hot Club of Detroit. A lady sitting right up front was bebopping along with the music while drinking red wine, whirling big forkfuls of pasta and just having the best ol' time. In the middle of it all, without missing a beat, she reached over and handed a napkin to the accordionist (Labro) who had worked up a real sweat while playing at a blistering pace as his fingers skipped over the unusual keyboard. And he, without missing a beat, handed it back to Kratzat, the bass player, to use. It was just that kind of an evening – no one missed a beat – we were all in it together. When it was said to Perri, "It's true that any kind of music can be suited to your band." He answered smiling, "I guess that's what we're here to prove."