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CONCERT REVIEW

Hot Clubs of Detroit, San Francisco sizzle in Django Reinhardt tribute at Michigan Theater

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You could call it dueling hot clubs, even though the audience was the clear winner.

The **Hot Club of San Francisco** and **Hot Club of Detroit** teamed up Friday night for “Silent Surrealism: **Django Reinhardt’s** 100th Birthday Celebration,” a two-and-a-half-hour celebration of Gypsy jazz at the [Michigan Theater](#) presented by the [University Musical Society](#). The groups pay tribute to the work of guitarist Reinhardt and violinist Stéphane Grappelli’s Quintette du Hot Club de France, which shook up the music world in the 1930s and ‘40s.

It should be noted that, although the hot clubs do perform some of Reinhardt’s compositions, they feel free to expand from where he began by interpreting the works of others, Django-style.

The night started off with a set from the West Coast ensemble, led by guitarist Paul Mehling, who proved not only musically proficient, but something of a wit as well (“We know you have a lot of choices when you go out for Gypsy jazz...”). Both groups were superb on their own; on the same bill they were unbeatable.

The two were different enough instrumentally (HCSF had a violin and a vocalist, for example, while HCD had neither but sported saxophones and accordion) to offer alternative approaches to music that had one thing in common — Reinhardt’s influence. Perhaps HCSF was more restrained while HCD was a little cheekier (a Django-fied version Lady Gaga’s paparazzi showed up in one of their songs, to the amusement of the younger folks in the house). Both were incredibly technically proficient (or as I overheard one impressed audience member wonder, “How do they play those guitars so fast?”).



Hot Club of Detroit

photo by Cybelle Codish



Hot Club of San Francisco

photo by Stuart Brinin

The Hot Club of San Francisco's segment of the program incorporated two short films courtesy of the San Francisco Silent Film Festival. The first, a 1930s comedy starring the Chaplin-esque Charles Bowers, mixed live action and animation flawlessly, telling the fantastical story of a bird that ate metal. The second, the 1912-vintage "The Land Before the Sunset," a short about the Fresh Air Society, followed a city urchin as he was treated to his first view of the world outside of New York's slums.

I found the films so fascinating it was hard to focus on the music, which was poignant when that mood was called for, and then ratcheted up the excitement in perfect sync with the visuals. The captivating music for "The Land Before the Sunset" was

composed by HCSF's Mehling in the Django tradition and played with great skill and emotion. Mehling was right; it is an entirely different experience watching silent films accompanied by live music.

Hot Club of Detroit's "On the Steps," based on Pat Martino's "On the Stairs" (with a bit of John Coltrane's "Giant Steps" in the mix), was one of the night's standouts, clearly illustrating that Reinhardt is just one of the group's influences. A Chopin etude, with Julien Labro subbing bandoneon for his accordion, was also sublime.

Not to be outdone, Hot Club of San Francisco played musical chairs during its encore, with Mehling taking over for the bass player, the violinist making his way to the bass, and the bass player pulling a trumpet out of his bag of musical tricks, all to the delight of the crowd. For the final number, both groups joined together for a no-holds-barred jam that brought the audience to its feet.

Near the end of the show, Mehling remarked on the talent that was Django Reinhardt. "None of us will ever come close to even touching his greatness ... but we're stupid enough to try," he said.

He also offered the hope that Friday night's concert would be the first of an annual Django Reinhardt birthday event in Ann Arbor. The audience seemed delighted by the idea, now it's up to UMS to make it happen.

Roger LeLievre is a free-lance writer who covers music for AnnArbor.com.

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