

Django, Hand on Fire: The Great Django Reinhardt

Salva Rubio

EFA, Illustrator

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The early life of guitar legend Django Reinhardt, and the accident that almost derailed his career, are the subjects of *Django, Hand on Fire*.

Born among a Belgian Roma community, Django plays the banjo from a young age. He's fast to surpass his peers. His rapid rise leads to paying work in well-known bands, and he falls in love with a girl whom he intends to marry. But then he leaves his first love, Naguine, to marry another woman, Bella; forgets his banjo in a taxi; and starts a fire in his caravan by smoking in bed. The blaze causes extensive damage to his left hand and threatens to end his career.

After Bella leaves Django, he finds new inspiration and begins the hard work of regaining his former musical mastery. Naguine returns; their reunion is joyful. This biography ends on a happy note, with hints of Django's coming, legendary musical work. Throughout, it weaves together the most reliable and compelling threads of Django's story—including his imperfections. He is sometimes arrogant; he treats his brother and first love poorly; he has a predilection for gambling. His determination to be great, no matter the cost, is off-putting at first, but after he's been humbled, it becomes his most admirable quality.

The art provides crucial visual details, from subtle facial expressions to the rich backgrounds of a Roma camp, jazz club, and hospital. It includes a kind of soundtrack, too, naming song titles that are supplemented by an enlightening afterword with photographs. *Django, Hand on Fire* is a fascinating account of the crucible in which an artist's second life was forged.

PETER DABBENE (January / February 2022)

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