

MUSIC

Jazz festival to keep Django's jazz spirit alive

Cory Walsh | Mar 13, 2020

Bands from around Montana and a few guests from Seattle are descending on Missoula March 21-22 at four venues for the Big Sky Django Jazz Festival, where they'll help keep the tradition of the guitarist's Hot Club-style jazz alive.



Update: *The festival has been postponed due to concerns about coronavirus, but the farmers market show may go on if the market is open, and Night Blooming Jasmine are still playing at Imagine Nation. See the "if you go" box at the end of this article.*

Bands from around Montana and a few guests from Seattle are descending on Missoula on March 21-22 at four venues for the Big Sky Django Jazz Festival, where they'll help keep the tradition of the guitarist's Hot Club-style jazz alive.

"This festival has really developed a community of musicians who are trying to make this scene more relevant to people, and we're also attracting some really heavy hitters within the scene," said Geoffrey Taylor, the festival coordinator and bandleader of Night Blooming Jasmine, a Missoula group.

The genre, which is well established and instantly recognizable, happens to have groups that play at a high level in four Montana cities. Besides his band, you can hear the Rimrock Hot Club, the Cottonwood Club of Helena, and Montana Manouche of Bozeman.

Two guests, Toby Hansen and Scott Adams, are bringing the genre's accordion flavor from Seattle. Next year, they're looking to bring in Dutch violinist Tim Kliphuis, an internationally recognized artist in the genre.

The festival was started in 2017 by Alex Nauman of the Rimrock Hot Club, a group in Billings that invited bands who worked in the style to come play for two years straight.

There was a year-break while the "roving" event organized by like-minded musicians was shifted to Missoula, Taylor said.

The style's originator was guitarist Django Reinhardt, who died in 1952.

In pre-World War II Paris, he "came up with a unique way of propelling the humble acoustic guitar into the front line of a jazz combo in the days before amplification became widespread," according to the [AllMusic.com biography](#) written by Richard S. Ginell.

His combo with violinist Stephane Grappelli, the Quintette of the Hot Club of France, generated the instantly recognizable sound, with a blend of European harmonies and American jazz, and a line-up of instruments that was distinct from horn-driven jazz in the United States.

"Not only did Reinhardt put his stamp upon jazz, his string band music also had an impact upon the parallel development of Western swing, which eventually fed into the wellspring of what is now called country music," Ginell wrote.

Taylor said Willie Nelson has listed Reinhardt as an influence, and the country legend performed a version of his song, "Nuages," in Missoula before.

Reinhardt was born in Belgium to Roma parents, and so the style has long been known as "gypsy jazz." The festival organizers were recently contacted by a concerned community member, since "gypsy" is now considered a slur.

They changed the name of the festival this year to Big Sky Django Jazz Festival and are encouraging the use of alternative terms like "Django jazz" or "Hot Club swing." They rebranded with the new name where they could, but some things like the website address were left in place since the event, which is new to Missoula, is approaching quickly.

Taylor plays fiddle with Night Blooming Jasmine, a Missoula group that originated as a quartet in 2016. It now has six members: Whitney Kent on vocals, John Rosett on mandolin, Jon Schick on lead guitar, Jasper O'Hara on rhythm guitar, and Jeff Turman on double bass.

His group has a vocalist, so they mix classics like "Django's Tiger" and "Minor Swing" with vintage jazz tunes like "Night and Day," and a "really hot version" of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow."

Like most of the people participating, Taylor has musical training and also plays in many other genres. In his case, it's everything from the symphony to bluegrass groups or old-time bands. He's drawn by the harmonic possibilities that provide more variety when improvising.

"It's really fun because it's a complex music, it's got a lot more harmonic variety than bluegrass does, which allows for more interesting improvisations, you know. There's just more room to play in that style," he said.

Besides the improvisation, it happens to be great dance music.

That's why the first concert on Friday, March 20, is the "Swing Dance" at [Free Cycles community bike shop's](#) large open floor. They're expecting concertgoers from Bozeman, which has a larger scene for dancing than Missoula, which the festival may help improve.

"Music and dancers are made for each other," he said.