

Bireli Lagrene
France

Interview.
'Reaching out.'

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Lance Bosman

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BIRELI LAGRENE

Reaching Out

by Lance Bosman



Photo by Lance Bosman.

WITH HIS CASUAL, DETACHED manner, Bireli Lagrene gives little outward indication of such inner energy. Until recently this has found release in perpetuating the musical legacy of Django Reinhardt. Inspired by this legendary figure and the jazz swing tradition, he has since diverged, setting his own stamp as a composer and guitarist of colourful originality.

At present, and as yet in his mid-twenties, Lagrene's recent ventures reveal an accomplished performer, stylistically versatile. Apart from his command of the guitar and jazz improvisation are his compositions and group arrangements. These were given a concert hearing at London's Queen Elizabeth Hall in April. Some numbers echoed his background in swing with strains of blues and bebop. Others took more novel turns. Conceived as group settings were compact themes broadened with free passage work and rhythmic breaks.

Like many concerts of today's younger jazz guitarists, this appearance was presented as more of a show than a concert. As such, hall amplification was brought in, and in this case whipped up, marring the guitar's natural sonorities with a penetrating sheen. It was particularly ill-applied here, obscuring Lagrene's fluid mastery of acoustic guitar technique. That touch he cultivated through his impressions of Django, a talent that launched him into the limelight from juvenile years. Then as now, though, his detached temperament referred to above has enabled him to take things in their stride, insulating him from the consuming forces of early success.

'I think it's simply that I didn't care when I was a kid. I was just like any other, playing sport, going to school. And I tell you the truth in saying that I don't care right now. I can't see it going to my head one way or the other. It's not that I set out to be like that, it just came. I can't even remember: as soon as I was conscious I started to play the guitar. It was Django and the guitar, not so much the particular music that surrounded him. Though I always listened to guitar playing, whatever was around. As a gypsy I have a lot of traditions to respect, although my parents didn't press our traditional music on me. My father was more into classical than gypsy music. So I could have picked up classical music, the Western tradition.'

Though steeped in Django's music for so many years, a recent CD *Acoustic Moments* (Blue Note 7952632 PM 520) particularly marks a sharp departure from those influences. Of several tracks pointing in new directions is a Lagrene original, a Venezuelan-like waltz ambiguously called *Made In France*. As one angle of his present diversification this number may hint of a search for a wider, universal embrace of styles. 'No, I don't think so. This was just an idea, but not necessarily a new approach to a style. I just wanted to lead in with a waltz. When I compose, most times I don't think about country or style—it's just a feeling at the moment. I'm fortunate in being able to move into any kind of style from bebop to rock and roll. This is great because there's no problem accommodating those sessions. People have told me that I'm open to all kinds of styles.'

'I compose with a four-track at home. When I start I don't have something special in mind I just go right in. The composition evolves out of itself. As for the waltz, well thinking back, although this is a definite tune I never worked that out beforehand. The ideas must have been already there with the melody. It was then a case of adding more to it, three guitar parts, though in a way these took care of themselves. It gets more complicated when I have to think of keyboard parts and drums, because their parts should go down on paper. I can't do that, so I have to remember them.'

In practice and theory Bireli Lagrene is self-taught. Accepting that improvisation is largely developed by ear, what then of harmony, particularly bebop with its intricate progressions and complex chord constructions? 'My bebop grew from what Django did, especially in the late Forties. It was this area that really fascinated me, and listening to Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker. As for being taught, I had a guitar teacher, he came a couple of days to see me, but all of a sudden he disappeared. I'll never know if he discontinued because he thought it unnecessary.'

Just as improvisation springs from a fixed composition, it can also be the stimulus for fashioning one. 'Yes because when I pick the guitar up it's not to practice but to improvise and compose. I couldn't do eight hours a day. I used to when I was a kid. Let's say I enjoy it now.'

At mention of early days, these range from pre-teens performances at the age of seven. Born in Strasbourg, France in 1966, Lagrene's reputation

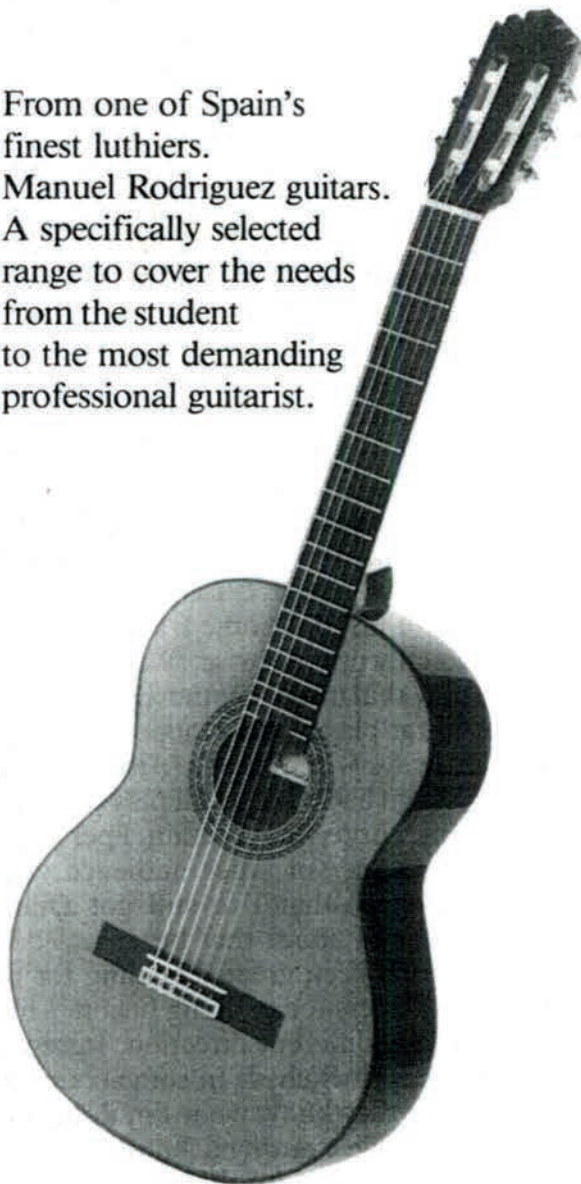


A young Bireli Lagrene ca. 1980. Photo by Herbert Steffe.

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broadened from 1980 through a tour with Stephane Grappelli, television exposure and festival attendances. He was featured in trios with Paco de Lucia, John McLaughlin and Al Di Meola. At that time, at just 13 years old, he released his debut album *Routes to Django*. Further tours followed with Larry Coryell, Stanley Clarke, 1987, and in the following year with the Gil Evans orchestra. With the present group his guitars include a Yamaha electric and Ovation. Members of the group are enduring friends, pianist Koono, Lioc Pontieux on drums with percussionist Simon Pomara.

For a rich sampling of Bireli in former full swing is a compilation CD, *Highlights* (Jazzpoint, ADD 1027). With selected sessions from the years 1980-86, the spirit of Django and the Hot Club is recaptured, now with the personal imprint of the present guitarist's compositions. To new numbers the old quintet is recalled with its driving accompaniments, tremoloed chords and those skimming improvisations. Here again is a guitarist on top of his craft, of fine toned melody, tasteful harmony, harmonics and percussive effects.

With a reputation founded on his emulation of Django Reinhardt, then an expression of just that is what an audience will expect. Listeners aside, in laying the ghost of his idol, some traces must still persist, intentionally or otherwise. 'Well I don't get the chance to play that music anymore. My brother who is a fine guitar player, has stopped and gypsy friends aren't always within reach. Also it doesn't enter my mind to go back. I can still play it but just can't find the time. As to what I retain, I personally can't tell but some of the audience have commented backstage that I've still got Django phrasing. I'm pleased about that because I don't want to deny it; it's been great schooling for me. With all the top players today doing fusion, I have come from a totally different direction. I grew up with it and now I've switched. In some countries, the United States, they know what I'm doing now but are still wondering; wanting to know how I was and what made me move into these present ways. But I don't think that its a weight because I'm finding my focus.'

Given that pick-players nowadays often adapt fingerstyle to counterpoint chord work and single line passages, does this resource figure in prospect? 'I can play a little but don't have the right hand technique. I play regular pick style, upstroke, downstroke. For octaves I use thumb brushing, damping the notes between. I wish I could sit down for a couple of months and work fingerstyle out, but I really don't have the time. At present I can just about play a little Bach, his chromatic fantasy.'

Another possible musical vein to tap might be the gypsy musical tradition, bringing into play its unique scales and harmony. 'Not really no; Gypsy

guitarists play the same scales, the same licks. But as far as people have said I seemed most to have captured what Django has done. Even his son told me that I come so close to him. That's one of the reasons I didn't want to continue this music, to present somebody else's music.'

With written music, players impress their personalities on the notes before them. They interpret. Whereas jazz musicians express themselves through improvisation and their own compositions. 'Right, and I always say that it's through your compositions that you really bring out your individuality; it's this rather than searching for a particular style. But generally it wasn't a problem for me to think that I have to do this or that to find my way, a way that people can recognise. Anyway I don't think I've reached that yet; I have to wait for it.'



Shaking off the presence of Django was not a sudden decision. It came gradually after tuning into popular trends, the fusions and rock of the Seventies. 'I worked on it when I was sixteen or thereabouts, when still very involved with Django's music. But at home in my basement I was trying everything, rock and roll, Hendrix. I listened to them but they didn't move me that much; I just wanted to know what was going on. The change happened around 1986-7. I remember feeling afraid when I first walked out on stage with my new material and with no prior recordings of it. Half the audience left, which I can understand. But then in '87 I recorded my first Blue Note album in the style I wanted to play. So after going down for a while I've come up since. I think I've reached a point where, those who don't know about my past won't think of me in terms of Django Reinhardt but myself.'

And quite clearly too as a guitarist with abundant ideas and a dazzling technique. But as one, you may also judge from *Acoustic Moments*, who is also given to excesses. There is a kind of youthful energy to Bireli Lagrene's playing, compulsively filling out spaces with flurries of notes where just doing nothing at times would carry more impact. 'It's a good point. It may have something to do with me playing acoustic guitar a lot in the past and electric here on which I'm much stronger. I guess that I'm still at a point where I want to impress and improve, show people how far I can go. Once this is over, when I get older, I won't need to. Like most musicians I hope to improve and get a little cooler. By this, though, I don't mean that I just played through this record and that I didn't feel for it.

'Maybe the reason it came out like this is that we didn't have much time to prepare, to dig into the music. I recorded that in three days. We were there the whole night, to seven in the morning. Not the most inspiring time, when you're falling asleep.'

A fair measure of this guitarist's talent for arranging can be gauged from *Acoustic Moments*, especially so from one of his original numbers *Stretch*. With taught unison lines from guitar and backing, it's a most eccentric, arresting composition of angular melody and erratic rhythms. 'Apart from the guitar this was all computer. No other musician played on this except keyboard. Everything was recorded on a sequencer. I just walked in and taped the guitar track on top of it. Mostly when you do a thing like that, on a sequencer, it sounds stiff, you know. I tried to make it fluid, to move. This was a tune I really worked hard on because there is a lot of arrangement in there, cross-rhythms and counterpoints. I worked it out with my keyboard player. His name is Koona, he can really play and is a fine composer too. He writes and directs with classical orchestras in Germany.'

A family man now, a parent, Bireli Lagrene measures his time from home carefully, 'so when

I'm touring I don't do more than three weeks. Life is balanced I would say. At home I do other things. I have friends go out with my family. I'm based in Strasbourg. Recently bought a house there. It's central for Europe and two or three times a year I visit the States.'

For this latest CD, *Acoustic Moments* new angles were projected alongside jazz standards including Coltrane's *Impressions* a springboard for spiralling improvisation. There were echoes too of the bossa nova from *Rhythm Things* and an atmospheric ballad *Three Views of a Secret*, displaying crystal-clear acoustic guitar. As composer and arranger, Bireli took on the production of this disk too. 'I never had before. It was a great experience to play, take care of the musicians, be behind the controls and keep my ears open. I tell you it's hard work, so I don't think I'll do it again.'

A daunting challenge to his versatility came with the invitation to solo with the Gil Evans orchestra. Being a non-reader, little advantage would have been gained from scanning the scores beforehand; so it was literally a matter of playing by ear. 'I got a call one day from Gil Evan's wife, to do a two-week tour. This was Italy and I had no rehearsals. So for the first two or three gigs I was listening. Gradually it got better and better. We played most of Gil's original compositions. I was lucky because they were playing compositions by him that I knew, the same repertory they play on his record. Being familiar tunes I just played along, keeping my ears open. These were live performances and there is a record of it, though I personally have never heard it.'

Having branched into several jazz fields now, forging his own identity, are there long-term objectives? 'I'd like to be recognised more as a composer, a musician than a guitarist. Being a player, well that can be great too, but if you can get both. . . For large-scale writing, arranging, maybe, but that's for the future. It's not clear yet, I'm not going for it crazy. At the moment it's just to be around, playing gigs.'

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