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Creating Guitars for Gypsy Jazz

By JAKE CIGAINERO APRIL 7, 2015



One of the jazz manouche, or gypsy jazz, guitars made by Christelle Caillot.
Agnes Dierhays for The New York Times

PARIS — Pigalle, on Paris's Right Bank, has long been known as the city's red-light district, luring revelers with garish neon, cabarets and hostess bars.

It is also the heart of the city for music: Throw a stone and you'll hit a store selling shiny, factory-made guitars and modern equipment. But on the quiet Rue de La Rochefoucauld, below Pigalle's seedy main drag, Christelle Caillot spends her days quietly making guitars — but not just any guitars. They are made to play jazz manouche, or gypsy jazz.

Jazz manouche emerged in Paris in the 1930s as a combination of traditional 19th-century French musette waltz, American jazz and the swinging style of one of its creators, the guitarist [Django Reinhardt](#), who led a band called the [Quintet of the Hot Club of France](#).

Mr. Reinhardt, of Roma descent, played bright, racing solos by picking chords with just two or three fingers on the steel strings of a guitar that, unlike a standard instrument, had a wide, pear-shaped body and a slightly domed top. (A caravan fire had left him with limited use of his hand.)

Today, Ms. Caillot, 42, replicates those guitars, which were manufactured by Selmer, a French company.

She has always worked with wood, though not always to make guitars. Ms. Caillot, who grew up just outside of Paris, initially was an environmental engineer in forestry with the World Wide Fund for Nature in Belgium, but she found her true calling when she heard the bouncing lilt of French gypsy jazz one evening in 2000 in a Brussels cafe.

A guitarist since she was about 18, she was mostly a blueswoman until she became smitten with the upbeat style of gypsy jazz and its swinging spirit. "I was totally in love with this type of music. It's very joyful," Ms. Caillot said.



Ms. Caillot fell in love with the sound of gypsy jazz in 2000 and then started learning how to build guitars.
Agnes Dierhays for The New York Times

Ms. Caillot began attending guitar-building classes on weekends and evenings at the Center for Musical Instrument Making in Brussels to make an instrument for herself. The hobby started as a distraction from her day job, but after one year, she quit the W.W.F. to devote herself to guitar making.

There are no official training programs for building gypsy guitars, so in

Belgium she studied American-style guitars, which use steel strings, like their jazz manouche relatives. "In my head, I wanted to make gypsy guitars," she said.

Ms. Caillot taught herself from plans she found for the large-body guitar shape. Her teacher didn't find gypsy guitars interesting but advised her anyway on technical aspects, like which wood was best (rosewood, maple and spruce) and which glue. But, she said, he was at a complete loss when it came to the sound.

The opening, or mouth, on the top of a classic guitar is perfectly round. On a gypsy guitar, the hole is either a large, rounded D-shape, used for rhythm and a big, strutting sound called "la pompe," or it's a longitudinal oval, which makes chords sound more compact and powerful to cut through dominant instruments like brasses.

Also, gypsy guitars are strung over a movable bridge all the way to the edge of the guitar, like on a violin, rather than on a fixed bridge halfway between the mouth and the bottom of the guitar, as on a classic instrument.

After five years in Brussels, Ms. Caillot moved to Granada, Spain, the center for classical Spanish guitars, where she learned techniques to build traditional nylon-string guitars. Together with a friend from school in Belgium, she opened her own workshop and then, four years later, returned to Paris.

Over the years, she has built 53 signed and numbered guitars. Each one takes approximately two months to build — one month for construction and one month for the varnish. She works only on commission, and she now has a waiting list of a year and a half.

"It's a long, slow process, contrary to all of the way of life," she said.

Few women make guitars, and even fewer make gypsy guitars. Of the 80 members in France's Professional Association of Artisan Luthiers in Guitar, only five are women. Ms. Caillot is the only female gypsy-guitar maker in the association.



Ladell McLin rehearsing on Bliss, an electric guitar made by Ms. Caillot and painted by the American artist Troy Henriksen. *Agnes Elebergs for The New York Times*

The manouche guitarist Angelo Debarre once played one of her instruments, which she said opened a lot of doors for her in the musical world. "Once they try my guitars, they always accept me," she said. Standard handmade gypsy guitars are priced about \$1,300; Ms. Caillot's start around \$5,000.

Her collectors range from hobbyists to professional musicians like Tommy Davy. Mr. Davy, who lives in California, was visiting Paris when he came to Ms. Caillot's workshop on the recommendation of the gypsy jazz luminary Serge Camps. After playing her guitars, he became her dealer in the United States, and he now commissions about 10 guitars a year from her.

Mr. Davy said he was struck by the consistency of her work and how the construction and sound of her guitars is so close to that of the original Selmer design. "For guitarists with great technique, the power you can get out of her guitars is fantastic," he said. "When I pick it up, I can automatically feel the instrument is giving back in such a way that it inspires."

Gypsy jazz, which had declined during the rock 'n' roll era, has had something of a revival in recent years. And, Mr. Davy said, there is a small but growing market among musicians who find that the style is becoming popular commercially.

Ms. Caillot also began working recently with the American artist Troy Henriksen to build hand-painted electric guitars. The two met when Mr. Henriksen brought one of his own guitars to her shop for repair.

They named one of their creations Bliss, a fire-engine red instrument embellished with strips of yellow and streaks of blue reminiscent of Keith Haring patterns and the word "love" emblazoned on the back. The American blues guitarist Ladell McLin occasionally plays Bliss when he appears in Paris. He said, "It's like driving a Ferrari. When you hold the guitar, it connects with your soul. The builder is so strong and passionate that you feel the soul of the guitar."

Next, Ms. Caillot plans to build a leather guitar with Anton Jones, an American designer who specializes in leather jackets and outfits.

"I love to share artisanship and collaborate. It's part of my work to explore," she said. "It's a live process, and that's why I love my job. You're never finished improving or looking for different techniques and new sounds — like music."