

How to start a gypsy jazz group

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by David Guinane

INTRODUCTION

In my experience, many secondary music departments are awash with guitarists (usually evidenced by their inability to leave cases in a sensible place). There are, of course, countless ways to get them involved with a school's music making: rock schools, bands, or the guitar chair in a big band, for example.

However, the 'bedroom guitarist' still thrives in many schools – the player who learns tunes from the internet, but lacks the experience of playing with others, thus not developing a whole range of essential musical skills. Without a guitar specialist in the department, or at least someone with the patience to watch them struggle to plug their instrument into an amp and tune up, guitarists can often be underused, or even abandoned entirely.

Gypsy jazz, best exemplified by the music of Django Reinhardt and Stéphane Grappelli, has provided a stimulating and challenging environment for guitarists (and many other musicians) in my school. This resource is designed to give all teachers a starting point for creating a gypsy jazz ensemble, a potential club or project that can involve potentially disaffected guitarists in your schools. Once you've got the basics down, you can expand the style to include a host of other musicians, developing their ability to improvise and play jazz.

Jazz Manouche

The Quintette du Hot Club de France was a jazz group founded in 1934 by guitarist Django Reinhardt and violinist Stéphane Grappelli. Their music was characterised by inventive improvisation, and the exciting rhythmic feel created by the combination of acoustic guitars and double bass. The group was active until the late 1940s, but following a revival of the style in the 1980s and 90s, gypsy jazz is currently alive and well across the globe. Modern players such as Joscho Stephan, Stochelo Rosenberg and Robin Nolan are all over YouTube, and Robin Nolan's 'gypsified' versions of AC/DC classics are guaranteed to excite your guitarists. Here are a few examples of the style to get your students interested:

- 'Minor Swing': arguably the most famous tune in the gypsy jazz repertoire, performed here by the originals – Django Reinhardt and Stéphane Grappelli.
- 'Les yeux noirs': a real 'hot' tune performed by the Rosenberg Trio.
- 'Tainted Love': a modern tune in the gypsy jazz style, performed by the Robin Nolan Trio.

SETTING UP A GYPSY JAZZ GROUP

You need a minimum of three things to get a gypsy group going:

- the chords and rhythm (there *must* be a guitar – a minimum of one, but as many as you like).
- the bassline (double bass, bass guitar, cello, keyboard – anything will do).
- the melody (any melody instrument will suffice).

All musical examples are provided as printable worksheets at the end of this resource.

A NOTE ON TYPES OF GUITARS

Guitars come in all shapes and sizes, but the three you're most likely to come across in schools are:

- nylon-strung 'classical' guitars
- steel-strung 'acoustic' guitars
- solid-body 'electric' guitars

For this type of jazz, acoustic guitars are best. They have the mid-range punch to allow the guitar to play the role of the drummer. The more acoustic guitars you can have in your group, the better.

Electric guitars work well for solos and improvisation, as long as they are played clean and without distortion. For rhythm, amplified guitars tend to have too much sustain and far too much bass to give the clipped sound that makes the music swing. However, there are a couple of things you can do to counteract this problem: use a single coil or neck pickup, and turn the volume knob down to a maximum 25% on the guitar itself. Use the amp's volume to turn up if you need to.

Django Reinhardt used a Selmer-Maccaferri 'grande bouche' or 'petite bouche' guitar – one designed for volume above all else. Fully acoustic archtop guitars also work well, as they concentrate on a mid-range sound.

MINOR SWING

You have to start with 'Minor Swing' – it's a great tune with a simple melody, and has a chord progression that can be taught in seconds. It provides the perfect platform to focus on rhythmic feel, and work on improvisation. I will take you through the components of the style, then the tune itself, step by step.

La pompe

Gypsy jazz is all about rhythm: the guitar outlines the harmonies, but also provides the rhythmic feel, the unique swing known as 'la pompe'. It's essentially an 'um-cha' accompaniment with accents on beats 2 and 4:



However, it really swings when a little 'kick' is placed before beats 1 and 3:



Of course, rhythmic feel can never be truly notated, so the most important thing is that your students listen to recordings and try emulate the feel from those.

Here is a great video isolating the rhythmic style.

When working on 'la pompe', get your guitarist(s) to mute their strings lightly with their fretting hand, and practise the rhythm only with a plectrum. The idea is to sound like drums, as short and as percussive as possible. When playing chords, they should 'choke' the note by lifting their fingers off the fret a little immediately after playing, creating as a short a note as possible.

To get the percussive sound, your guitarists will need to use as heavy a pick as possible, and ideally heavy strings. Django Reinhardt reputedly used tortoise-shell picks, but a cheaper and less cruel option is to use a Jim Dunlop 3mm 'Big Stubby' pick, available in bulk packs. Encourage your guitarists to use a loose wrist, and to avoid any tension in their arms.

Chord progression

The beauty of 'Minor Swing' is that it only uses three chords. It is split into two eight-bar sections, and the chord progression is provided as a chart on the **Minor Swing Chords** worksheet. I'll cover the intro and outro shortly. The 6 chord, whether major or minor, is the sound of swing, and the essence of gypsy jazz.

Chord voicings

Three-note chords are essential to getting the right sound, and 'Minor Swing' can be played with just one chord shape moved up and down the guitar neck. The **Minor Swing Chord Voicings for Guitars** worksheet presents the simplest way of playing the Am6, Dm6 and E7 chords, using guitar chord diagrams.

The bassists need only play the root and 5th of each chord, on beats 1 and 3. On an electric bass or double bass, this is mainly open strings, and the **Minor Swing Bassline** worksheet provides the easiest way to do this. Later, you can add a walking bassline, stretching your bass players should you need to.

WHY YOUR GUITARISTS SHOULD LEARN THREE-NOTE CHORDS

Two reasons that developing guitarists find it hard to fit in many jazz ensembles are tessitura and role. Barre chords, a staple of modern guitar tuition, simply contain too many notes, clouding what is already heard elsewhere in an ensemble.

In gypsy jazz, swing, or early big band playing, the role of the guitar is less about fully outlining the harmony, and more about providing a steady crotchet pulse. Guitarists are the glue that holds everyone else together – almost pitched percussion, if you will. Freddie Green, the great guitarist in the Count Basie Big Band, took this concept to the extreme by playing 'one-note chords', but if you listen to that band, and listen carefully to Green's guitar, you soon realise that it is he who really makes the band swing.

Consider a major barre chord. It contains three roots, two 5ths, and one 3rd. In a jazz band setting, the bass will take care of the root (and probably the 5th), and the horns will usually play any upper extensions of the chord. The guitar player should be focusing on playing the 3rd, the essential note in defining the flavour of the harmony. However, the 3rd in the barre guitar voicing is drowned out by five arguably superfluous notes.

Now look at the minor 6 chord voicing for the chords in 'Minor Swing'. Aside from the root, the guitar is playing the 3rd, defining the harmony, and the 6, giving the chord its unique 'sonic colour'. Why play any more notes, and overcomplicate things?

The three-note chord voicings allow guitarists to focus on the rhythmic quality of their playing – the short, cutting quarternotes that hold everyone together. Emphasising the D and G strings will allow them to find a place of their own in the texture. No longer will they get in the way of everyone else. To really capture 1930s or 40s swing, make your piano player play everything an octave up, and tie their left hand behind their back (think Count Basie). This resource, *The 20 Essential Rhythm Guitar Voicings*, is standard learning for any guitarists in my big bands, jazz combos or gypsy jazz groups.

Melody

'Minor Swing' doesn't really have a 'head' in the traditional sense. It starts with an intro that outlines the triads of Am and Dm. You can find this notated or in TAB on the **Minor Swing Intro Notation** or the **Minor Swing Intro TAB** worksheets.

After that, the chord progression is repeated, and improvised solos are played over the top (more on that later).

The outro is the closest we get to a 'tune'. You can find this notated or in TAB on the **Minor Swing Outro Notation** or the **Minor Swing Outro TAB** worksheets. The outro chords are the A section of the main chord progression, repeated twice, and students who have stopped concentrating usually go wrong here!

Remember: this is swing music, so all notated quavers on any worksheet are swung!

The finer points of the tune are reinterpreted by artists all the time – and these resources suggest the simplest way to create a performance of 'Minor Swing'. If your students struggle with the worksheets (there are countless ways of presenting a three-chord progression), encourage them to listen to recordings, and/or create their own intros/outros.

IMPROVISATION

Let's recap. You have:

- Melody instruments (anything)
- Chordal instruments (guitars)
- Bass instruments (anything)

Your students can (hopefully):

- play the intro.
- play 'la pompe' rhythm over the main chord progression.
- play the outro.

This is jazz, so now we need to get students improvising over the main chord progression. There are a number of approaches here. They will work for any instrumentalist, but I will present them in this resource from a guitarist's perspective.

Scales

The simplest approach is to use scales – guitarists often begin learning to improvise on a blues scale, and that will work here. These scales will suffice in the first instance:

- A natural minor or A blues over the first eight bars (A section)
- D natural minor or D blues over the second eight bars (B section)

The TAB and notation for these scales are provided on the **Minor Swing Scales for Improvisation** worksheet.

As with all improvised solos, an organic process tends to happen over time, which you can encourage as you rehearse:

- **Step 1:** students run up and down scales, starting and finishing on the root.
- **Step 2:** students create small melodic ideas using the notes of the scale.
- **Step 3:** students repeat and develop these little ideas, forming a coherent solo.
- **Step 4:** students experiment with chromatic notes and dissonance, often by making mistakes.

Guitarists take note: I've given the TAB scales in different positions, to encourage students to create smooth lines over the change of chords/tonality. I want to avoid the awkward and jarring 'shifting of positions' that guitarists tend to do when changing scales halfway through a solo.

Arpeggios

Now it's time to get your guitarists firmly out of their comfort zone. Improvising in jazz means improvising over 'the changes', ie the chord progression, so most jazzers in this style will utilise arpeggios rather than scales.

Some common arpeggios your musicians can use are outlined on the **Minor Swing Arpeggios for Improvisation** worksheet. Obviously, the Am6 arpeggio should be used over Am6, the Dm6 over Dm6, and so on.

Working through the arpeggios works in a very similar way to the steps described above. However, I've discovered a couple of little 'hacks' that have worked really well when rehearsing this tune with students:

- Get students to experiment with grace notes one or two fret(s) above or below a 'chord' tone.
- Students play crotchets only – a chord tone on the first and third beat of every bar, and any other note on the second and fourth beats, listening to the resultant sound.

Licks

Licks, or short melodies, are an important part of any improvisation. Solos made entirely of licks, or entirely of scales for that matter, aren't ideal, but using stylistic melodic ideas can help students develop a really musical improvisational language.

Some licks are provided on the **Minor Swing Licks** worksheet, which you could rehearse as group, or give students to take away and practise. They're just a starting point, but they capture a little of gypsy jazz improvisation.

LEARN FROM THE PROS

The original 'Django solo' from the 1938 recording of 'Minor Swing' is legendary, and a rite of passage for any serious gypsy jazz musician. In my time performing this music I've heard the solo played on guitar, violin, mandolin, flute and even DJ decks. Students can find it by searching Google for 'Minor Swing Django Solo'. Most of it is fairly accessible, and I've found students enjoy learning it.

Any search for 'Minor Swing' online will yield lots of courses, lessons, studies and solos. Encourage your more advanced/engaged students to go away and use the internet to get inside this tune.

WHY GYPSY JAZZ? A SUMMARY

I've found that students, and guitarists in particular, really engage in gypsy jazz through learning 'Minor Swing'. It's a style they're often unfamiliar with (though some have heard the name Django Reinhardt before), and they play their guitars in a brand new way: by focusing on rhythmic feel, they quickly improve their ensemble performance skills. It's a route into improvisation that can be scaled up or down – it can be as simple or as complex as you want, from just two scales, all the way to complex arpeggios and chromatic licks.

For non-guitarists, particularly 'classical instrumentalists', the potential benefits are huge. The tune is so simple that they memorise it quickly, and so are forced to look up from sheet music and interact with the other musicians in their ensemble. It's a great way to encourage improvisation on any instrument, and Stéphane Grappelli acts as a real inspiration to violinists who fear the absence of notes.

If you try gypsy jazz, the emphasis should be on rhythmic feel and swing. Don't move on until your musicians are getting 'la pompe' right. Refer to the videos suggested and get students to relax, listen, and enjoy.

Where next?

After perfecting 'Minor Swing', if your students are hungry for more gypsy jazz, here are a few more ideas.

ADD DRUMS

I've focused on guitars taking the role of drummers in gypsy jazz, which of course they do, but lots of percussionists have also played in this style of music. It needs to be subtle, so concentrate on hi-hats and brushes on the snare drum. The cajón is good – here is a video of a percussionist jamming on 'Minor Swing'.

There's nothing wrong with a piano in the 'gypsy' setting, but it should be an instrument that comps sparsely, and takes solos. Above all, it should stay out of the way of your guitarists!

LEARN MORE TUNES

After 'Minor Swing', chord progressions get a little more complicated, but that shouldn't stop your keen students. A few accessible next-step tunes with simple chord progressions are:

- 'Les yeux noirs'
- 'Swing 48'
- 'Swing Gitan'

Chord progressions for these tunes are found all over the internet. Here and here are a couple of good French resources for gypsy jazz 'grilles' (or chord progressions). The second website also contains an 'accords' section, which details the correct voicings for all the new chords.

For the melodies, a Google search for the 'Django Fakebook' should give you a PDF full of jazz tunes in the Hot Club style.

EXPAND YOUR IMPROVISATION VOCABULARY

For students looking to improve their improvisation in the gypsy jazz style, here are few key resources I would recommend:

- **Backing tracks:** YouTube is full of gypsy jazz videos, which students can discover on their own, but they should start with backing tracks. These are simply the chord progressions for songs played in the gypsy jazz style, usually with just rhythm guitar and double bass. Students can practise the melodies, and/or solos, in the comfort of their bedrooms, at their own pace.
- **Online articles and books:** again, there are thousands of 'online lessons' and instructional methods for gypsy jazz. Some are good, some are not so good, and some are teasers for paid lessons and/or books. Here are a few I recommend:
 - *Getting into Gypsy Jazz Guitar* by Stephane Wrembel (Mel Bay, eBook, book and CD)
 - Six gypsy jazz licks you must know
 - A gypsy jazz guitar lesson from Jazz Guitar Online
 - 'The Magic of Triads' from Jazz Guitar Online
- Robin Nolan, a gypsy jazz musician based in Amsterdam, has a regular series of videos on YouTube, that covers a wide variety of things related to gypsy jazz playing. I'd recommend checking them out.

The 'Magic of Triads' article is one the best approaches I've come across to helping guitarists move away from playing 'shapes' when improvising, and develop a really musical sense of line.

Worksheets

Worksheet 1: Minor Swing – Chords

Intro (repeated x2)

Am6	Dm6	Am6	Dm6
Am6	Dm6	E7 – bass break	E7 – bass break

Form (chords for solos) – repeated ad libitum:

Am6	Am6	Dm6	Dm6
E7	E7	Am6	Am6
Am6	Am6	Dm6	Dm6
E7 (Bb7)	E7	Am6	E7

(the Bb7 chord in brackets is a common substitution)

Outro (first time)

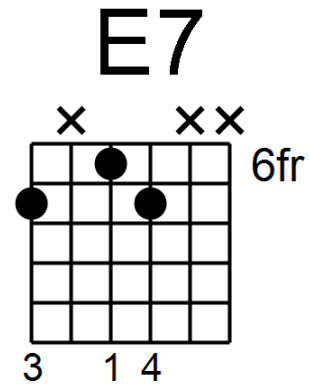
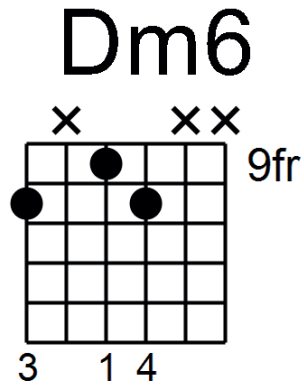
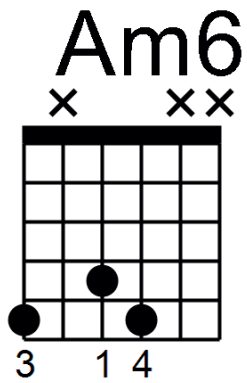
Am6	Am6	Dm6	Dm6
E7	E7	Am6 – bass break	Am6 – bass break

Outro (second time)

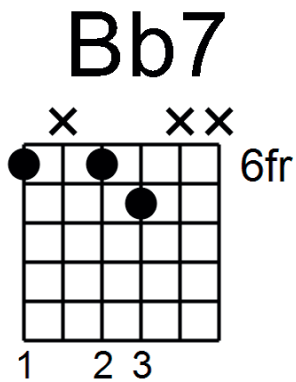
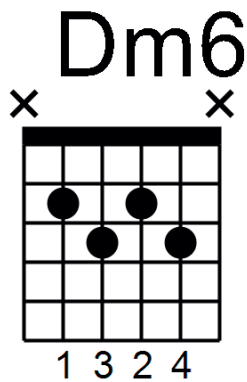
Am6	Am6	Dm6	Dm6
E7	E7	E7 – guitar break	Am6

Worksheet 2: Minor Swing – Chords Voicing for Guitars

Basic chords:



Advanced chords (alternative Dm6 voicing and Bb7):



Worksheet 3: Minor Swing – Bass line

Am⁶ Dm⁶

Bass

Bass

5 E⁷ Am⁶

Bass

Bass

9 Dm⁶ Am⁶

Bass

Bass

13 E⁷ Am⁶ E⁷

Bass

Bass

Worksheet 4: Minor Swing – Intro – Notation

Part 1 (Melody)

Part 2 (Harmony)

Bass line

Pt 1

Pt 2

Bass

5 Am⁶ Dm⁶ E⁷ E⁷

1. 2.

then follow chord progression...

(or similar run leading to Am6 chord)

Worksheet 5: Minor Swing – Intro – TAB

Am⁶ Dm⁶ Am⁶ Dm⁶

Acoustic Guitar

Acoustic Guitar

Bass Guitar

Am⁶ Dm⁶ E⁷ E⁷

5

1. 2.

A. Gtr.

A. Gtr.

Bass

then follow chord progression...

(or similar run leading to Am6 chord)

Worksheet 6: Minor Swing – Outro – Notation

Melody

Am⁶ Dm⁶

Rhythm guitars continue 'La Pompe'

Bass line

Melody

5 E⁷ N.C.

1.

Bass

(or similar run leading to Am⁶ chord)

Melody

9 N.C. Am⁶

2.

Bass

Worksheet 7: Minor Swing – Outro – TAB

Melody

Am⁶ Dm⁶

Rhythm guitars continue 'La Pompe'

Bass line

Melody

E⁷ N.C.

Bass

(or similar run leading to Am⁶ chord)

Melody

N.C. Am⁶

Bass

Worksheet 8: Minor Swing – Scales for Improvisation

1 A natural minor 6 7 6 7

2 D natural minor 6 7 b6 7

Melodic minor - sharpen the 6th and 7th degree of the scale when ascending (raise it by one fret), but not when descending
 Harmonic minor - sharpen the 7th degree of the scale when ascending or descending
 The 6th and 7th degrees are labelled for you

3 A blues scale

4 D blues scale

Worksheet 9: Minor Swing – Arpeggios for Improvisation

Am6

9/4

TAB 9/4

5 8 7 4 7 5 5 7 5

Detailed description: This block shows the first arpeggio exercise for the Am6 chord. It consists of two staves. The top staff is a treble clef with a 9/4 time signature, containing a sequence of notes: G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4. The bottom staff is a guitar TAB with a 9/4 time signature, showing fret numbers: 5, 8, 7, 4, 7, 5, 5, 7, 5. Vertical tick marks align the notes with the fret numbers.

2 Dm6

9/4

TAB 9/4

5 8 7 4 7 6 5 7 10

Detailed description: This block shows the second arpeggio exercise for the Dm6 chord. It consists of two staves. The top staff is a treble clef with a 9/4 time signature, containing a sequence of notes: D2, E2, F2, G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3. The bottom staff is a guitar TAB with a 9/4 time signature, showing fret numbers: 5, 8, 7, 4, 7, 6, 5, 7, 10. Vertical tick marks align the notes with the fret numbers.

3 E7

9/4

TAB 9/4

7 5 7 6 9 7 9 9 7 10

Detailed description: This block shows the third arpeggio exercise for the E7 chord. It consists of two staves. The top staff is a treble clef with a 9/4 time signature, containing a sequence of notes: E2, F2, G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3. The bottom staff is a guitar TAB with a 9/4 time signature, showing fret numbers: 7, 5, 7, 6, 9, 7, 9, 9, 7, 10. Vertical tick marks align the notes with the fret numbers.

4 Bdim (commonly used in place of E7)

9/4

TAB 9/4

7 5 8 6 9 7 10 9 7

Detailed description: This block shows the fourth arpeggio exercise for the Bdim chord. It consists of two staves. The top staff is a treble clef with a 9/4 time signature, containing a sequence of notes: B1, C2, D2, E2, F2, G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3. The bottom staff is a guitar TAB with a 9/4 time signature, showing fret numbers: 7, 5, 8, 6, 9, 7, 10, 9, 7. Vertical tick marks align the notes with the fret numbers.

Worksheet 10: Minor Swing – Licks

Am6 - arpeggio figure with added notes

3 Dm6 - arpeggio figure with added notes

5 E7 - arpeggio figure with added notes

6 E7 - Am6 - run using G#dim arpeggio

8 Am6 - Dm6 - phrase with chromatic descent