

BIRELI LAGRENE

Biography

Since the 1980s, Bireli Lagrene has reigned as one of the world's undisputed masters of jazz guitar.

In the early 1980s, Lagrene emerged as a child prodigy - a true "wunderkind" - transforming raw talent into profound artistry. Born in 1966 in Saverne, in France's Alsace region (the heart of the Gypsy community), he grew up in a family of musicians. His father and brother introduced him to the guitar at an early age, and he was soon spotted by Matelot Ferré, a close companion of Django Reinhardt.

Heavily influenced by Django in his formative years, Lagrene immersed himself in the master's recordings, first recreating choruses verbatim before forging his own distinctive voice. This evolution shines through in his early trilogy: *Routes to Django* (1980), *Bireli Swing '81* (1981) and *Fifteen* (1982) - a bold "free manifesto" echoing the Manouche spirit of unbound liberty. As Lagrene has said, "Django helped me go and see what is happening elsewhere," with jazz representing limitless freedom.

Bireli was influenced not only by Django, but also Wes Montgomery and George Benson and soon turned to the fusion of Jaco Pastorius and Weather Report.

From 1986 onward, following collaborations with Stéphane Grappelli and Larry Coryell, Lagrene dove fully into fusion. He briefly considered the bass (inspired by Pastorius, he proved a formidable player) but ultimately recommitted to guitar, developing a dazzling, highly adaptive style marked by exceptional improvisation. This period brought collaborations with legends like John McLaughlin, Paco de Lucía, Al Di Meola, Jack Bruce and Ginger Baker (in a temporary Cream reformation), Stanley Clarke, Miroslav Vitouš, Lenny White, and Mike Stern. Not to mention two live albums with Jaco Pastorius himself.

In 1990, *Acoustic Moments* offered a stunning synthesis of traditional jazz and fusion. He found further critical acclaim with the "classic" approach of *Standards* (1992). The 1993 release *Viaggio* marked rising national and international recognition, including the prestigious Django d'Or award that year. In 2001, he earned a Victoires de la Musique (France's equivalent of a Grammy) for *Front Page* (2000), a power trio project with Dominique Di Piazza and Dennis Chambers for Universal. This success fueled the acclaimed *Gipsy Project* (2001).

At 35, after exploring nearly every facet of modern guitar and collaborating with the finest jazz musicians, Lagrene - wild yet subtle, lightning-fast - returned boldly to his roots. He balanced virtuosity and depth in *Gipsy Project & Friends* (2002), celebrating tradition with joyful spontaneity.

Continuing in the tradition of Gypsy jazz, *Move* (2004) was refreshingly innovative by replacing violin with saxophone, delivering a striking repertoire and masterful swing. Growing success led to major festival tours and a triumphant 2005 Olympia recording featuring guest guitarist, the late Sylvain Luc.

In October 2006, celebrating his 40th birthday, Dreyfus Jazz released the exceptional double CD set *Djangology* (with the WDR Big Band Cologne) and *To Bi or Not To Bi* (a solo live album).

The album *Mouvements* (2012, Universal) showcased another facet of his versatility: A sophisticated fusion blend of blues, jazz, groove, and rock-tinged elements. Recorded with a modern quartet featuring several original compositions alongside standards highlighting Lagrene's instrumental command and ability to bridge neoclassical, swing, ballads, and blues in a cohesive, groove-driven sound.

The past 26 years - honored by the 2012 Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres medal have seen Lagrene released 19 albums, including *The Alternative* (with Jimmy Rosenberg and Angelo Debarre), the inspired *D-Stringz* (with Stanley Clarke and Jean-Luc Ponty), the magnificent *Tribute to Stéphane & Django* (with Roby Lakatos), *Remembering Jaco* (with The Multiquarium Big Band), and the superb solo recording, *Solo Suites* (2022).

In 2026, *Elegant People* reveals Lagrene in pursuit of the essential. With his instrumental mastery at its peak, he sheds unnecessary acrobatics for fundamentally spontaneous expression guided by clear vision. Meticulously prepared with carefully selected pieces and original compositions, the recording offers his new quartet contrasting landscapes ideally suited to a true group sound.



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