

July 24, 2005----The gypsy runs of French guitarist Django Reinhardt serve as a metaphor for the life of Glen Campbell.

Reinhardt was a major influence on Campbell when he was growing up in Arkansas, and that started him on a lifelong quest for the perfect melody -- which became Campbell's passport into sessions with Frank Sinatra, Brian Wilson, Merle Haggard, Phil Spector and many others.

Campbell's best known hits recall a gypsy's search for place:
"By the Time I Get to Phoenix," "Galveston" and "Wichita Lineman."

His restless nature also has proven to be tabloid fodder. He's been married four times, he was hooked on cocaine in the late 1970s, and last year, he was convicted of drunk driving in Phoenix. But now he's back on the straight and narrow.

Jimmy Webb wrote Campbell's best-known songs. If you listen closely to Webb compositions like "By the Time I Get to Phoenix" and "Highwayman" (which Campbell gave to Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson and Kris Kristofferson), you hear how Webb's ambitious melodies mirrors the adventurous fretwork of Reinhardt. Campbell set out to emulate Reinhardt's attitude of timing and tone.

"Django had total freedom," Campbell said last week in an interview from Malibu, Calif., his home of only four weeks. He began scat-singing Reinhardt's jazzy licks. "He didn't follow any pattern whatsoever. That's what knocked me out. See, Jimmy Webb writes songs I like because the melody is great, the range is great and the chord progressions are beyond incredible. Sometimes it reminds me of all those Hot Club of France which Reinhardt formed with violinist Stephane Grappelli tunes that were written before 1936. Reinhardt was awesome."

Between 1996 and 1998, Campbell headlined his own Glen Campbell Goodtime Theatre in Branson, Mo. "It was like getting up and going plowing," he said. "After the first week, I said, 'I got to get out of this.' I am going in next May to Branson for four weeks with Andy Williams. Now, that's fun. We do one show at night and got all day to play golf."

Now 69, Campbell left Arkansas at the age of 16. He relocated to Albuquerque, N.M., to play in a three-piece country combo with his uncle Dick Bills. He soon formed his own band and hooked up with steel player Ray Norn. "He was one of those mad musicians, into everything such as Chicago's John Rice," Campbell said. "He built a six-string steel guitar where you could bend each string up or down a tone. And it was on rollers! And he had all the Django Reinhardt stuff on wire recorders. This was in the middle 1950s, and I never heard

anybody play like that. You never knew what was going to happen next."

That's what it's like to talk to Campbell. You don't know what's going to happen next. He is a Zelig of American pop and country music.

Willie Nelson is another Reinhardt devotee, which leads to the Highwaymen, which leads to Johnny Cash (who picked Campbell's version of "Wichita Lineman" as one of his all-time favorite songs), which leads to Haggard and Capitol Records in the 1960s and (Dean Martin/Sinatra producer) Jimmy Bowen -- and the beat goes on.

Campbell witnessed all of it.

Campbell wanted to take first crack at Webb's "Highwayman." He was told to hit the road instead. "I had recorded it in 1978 and everything, and the label said it wasn't my kind of song," Campbell recalled. "I wondered, 'Whose kind of song is it?' Then they played me 'My Sharona' by the Knack and said, 'We'd like you to do stuff like this; break your image.' And that was the last time I was in Capitol Records studios. They never recovered from that. My wife is in the background right now, saying, 'Please don't talk bad,' but I'm not calling any names."

Campbell's first No. 1 hit was 1975's "Rhinestone Cowboy," written by Larry Weiss, who wrote the 1967 smash "Bend Me, Shape Me" for Chicago's American Breed.

"I heard Weiss' 'Rhinestone Cowboy' on the radio," he said. "When I heard it, it blew my face off. I didn't do it the way Larry did it. I put it uptempo and changed the feel." Campbell's hit resurfaced in 2003 when "Rhinestone Cowboy" was included in a hip-hop mix by London DJs Rikki and Daz. Campbell said, "I talked to them yesterday. Now they want to do 'Highwayman' the same way they did 'Rhinestone Cowboy.'"

But Campbell's most timeless material comes from the Webb songbook. "The first record Jimmy bought was one of mine," Campbell said. "It was 'Turn Around, Look at Me' which Campbell recorded in 1961, popularized by the Vogues in 1968. He was a kid in Oklahoma. Well, we were all kids then. Then, I found 'By the Time I Get to Phoenix' on a Johnny Rivers album. I cried because I was so damn homesick. I wanted to go home to Arkansas. I didn't know Jimmy. When he heard my record of the song, that's when he got in touch with me and started writing for me."

Campbell has since recorded more than 70 Webb songs, including the complex "MacArthur Park."

The gentlemanly Ken Nelson, originally from Chicago, signed Campbell to Capitol in 1962, where he scored his first major hit with John Hartford's "Gentle on My Mind." As a producer, Nelson never stood in the way of his artist, a style which was deeply appreciated by his young singers such as Campbell, Haggard and Buck Owens.

"He'd say, 'You're the artist, paint it.' And then he'd say, 'I'm here to get the sound

and make sure you stay in tune.' And he did it. He did such a great job on Haggard's stuff. I played rhythm guitar on Hag's sessions. Then Bonnie Owens and I sang live. We would overdub the harmonies. To this day, I still sing harmony parts of everything I did with Haggard," and he started singing Haggard's "I'm a Lonesome Fugitive": "Down every road there's always one more city. That was my part."

Recorded at Capitol in 1966, Haggard's "I'm a Lonesome Fugitive" followed a stunning 586 sessions Campbell did for the label in 1963, according to the label's archives.

Campbell played the guitar solo on the Beach Boys' "Dance, Dance, Dance." He also played with Haggard on "I Take a Lot of Pride in What I Am," "Mama Tried" and others, and he played on Nat King Cole's "Lazy Hazy Days of Summer" album.

"How many days are there in a year?" he asked. "That was an average of two sessions a day."

Campbell also was part of Phil Spector's "Wrecking Crew." Campbell said, "I was the rhythm guitar player because I couldn't read notes. I could read a chord progression. 'The Wrecking Crew' consisted of about 15 guys. It was the best batch of musicians including Hal Blaine, Leon Russell, Mac Rebennack. I look back and think, 'I actually got to do that.' I'll be listening to the radio and hear 'Be My Baby' or a Righteous Brothers song, and I'll think, 'Wow, this all seems like a dream now.'"

Is there a place for Campbell in the Rock n' Roll Hall of Fame?

"Of course," he said. "But I'll be in the musician's rock 'n' roll hall. They could never put me in a slot. They couldn't say Glen was 'country,' 'pop' or 'rock' I'm crock, OK? A cross between country and rock. Call me crock."