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## Hot Club's airier, sleeker sound

The Hot Club of Detroit has always walked a delicate tightrope, honoring its commitment to the nostalgia of Django Reinhardt-inspired gypsy jazz with the recognition that jazz and American culture didn't stop evolving in 1944. If the band looks too far into the past, it becomes simply an exercise in musical dress-up. If it looks too far into the future, the music turns into awkward pastiche.

On "Night Town," the Detroit quintet's sophomore album for Mack Avenue Records, the band offers compelling evidence of an increasingly mature balance of elements. The Hot Club has by no means turned its back on its roots -- the new album includes several Django covers and related material -- but overall the music clearly packs a more contemporary punch than the band's 2006 debut for Mack Avenue, the Grosse Pointe Farms label founded by jazz lover and philanthropist Gretchen Valade. The group is celebrating the upcoming Tuesday release of "Night Town" with a party Saturday at Cliff Bell's in Detroit.

Part of the shift in the balance between old and new is traceable to some key personnel changes. First, the band has slimmed down from its original sextet, dropping one of the two rhythm guitars that supported lead guitarist and group founder Evan Perri. The result is a sleeker, lighter sound immediately apparent on the album's opener, a scampering version of "I Want To Be Happy." The band's rhythm is still defined by the steady chug of guitar and bass but it sounds airier.

Second, tenor and soprano saxophonist Carl Cafagna, fundamentally a post-bopper, has replaced the swing-styled clarinetist Dave Bennett. Cafagna's well-constructed solos on surprisingly modern material like Miles Davis' "Seven Steps to Heaven" stretch the band way past typical Django-inspired Hot Club ensembles. At the same time, his soprano tone recalls the traditional character of Sidney Bechet or even the iconoclastic modernist Steve Lacy. On the jaunty "J'Attendrais," the blend of Cafagna's soprano with fleet fingered accordionist Julien Labro straddles the past-present fault line in particularly alluring fashion.

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