



Van Ronk Sings

BED BUG BLUES

YAS-YAS-YAS

TELL OLD BILL

GEORGIE & THE IRT

SEE MY GRAVE IS KEPT CLEAN

HESITATION BLUES

HOOTCHIE KOOTCHIE MAN

DINK'S SONG

RIVER COME DOWN

JUST A CLOSER WALK WITH THEE

COME BACK BABY

SPIKE DRIVER'S MOAN

STANDING BY MY WINDOW

WILLIE THE WEEPER

SWEET SUBSTITUTE

Van Ronk

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FA-2393

Van Ronk sings

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

DAVE VAN RONK SINGS

Volume 2

Notes by Eric Von Schmidt

THIS ALBUM IS FOR TERRI

"Love is a torment
Whenever we hide it.
Why not lay it bare
Like the moon that appears
From behind the mountain ledge."

Anonymous Japanese poet
Amient Period

The blues are common property. The most recent form, the most vital in contemporary American terms, grew from the suffering of the southern Negro in slavery times, his frustrations in the bitter post-Civil War period, the movement first to the big cities, then north.

The blues have several easily recognizable forms, 12 bar, 8 bar, etc., but now as the wealth of recorded country blues and songs from the southern prisons are becoming more widely known, the emphasis is shifting from the scholarly insistence on form to what might be called a "blues approach."

Dave Van Ronk sings many songs on this record besides songs in the accepted blues form, but with one or two exceptions the blues approach is there.

Eric von Schmidt

The Songs

Bed Bug Blues The present governor of the "gret stet" of Louisiana is reputed to be the author of this blues although he doesn't like to admit it. Too bad, as it's one of the few worthwhile things he's ever done. Van Ronk lets go with a driving version unlike the usual slow drag treatment of Bessie Smith or Lonnie Johnson and gives you the impression that he's not entirely in the "Love All Sentient Beings" camp.

BED BUG BLUES

Bed bug is mean and evil, he don't mean me no good
Bed bug is mean and evil, he don't mean me no good,
Thinks he's a woodpecker, my poor body's a piece of wood.

Bed bug's as big as a jackass, will bite you and
stand and grin,
Bed bug's as big as a jackass, will bite you and
stand and grin,
You know they'll tell the other bed bugs, it's dinner
time, better all begin.

I go to bed at night and I wonder how a poor boy can
sleep,
I go to bed at night and I wonder how a poor boy can
sleep,
One is holding my hands, while the others is biting
my feet.

I pace the floor at night, I'm so tired I'm 'bout to
drop dead,
I pace the floor at night, I'm so tired I'm 'bout to
drop dead,
You know the damn little bed bugs won't let me get
into bed.

Someone was moaning in the corner while I was trying
to sleep,
Someone was moaning in the corner while I was trying
to sleep,
It was a bed bug mother praying, "Lord, give my
children more to eat."

I got myself a wishbone, these bugs they got my goat,
I got myself a wishbone, these bugs they got my goat,
You know I wish every one of them would cut their own
goddamned throat

Yas-Yas-Yas Some of us bolder second graders used to
scandalize the playground with the first verse of this
one, ending it with the daring:

"I know a gal, lives on the hill
She won't do it, but her sister will,
Never took a bath and never will,
Haacht-ptutt, Dirty Lil."

YAS-YAS-YAS

Mama bought a chicken, well she thought it was a duck,
Put him on the table with his legs sticking up,
Now in comes Sis with a spoon and a glass,
And starts dishing out the gravy from his yas-yas-yas.

Mama, Mama, take a look at Sis,
You know she's out on the levee and she's dancing
like this,
Well now, come on in here Sis, and come in here fast,
And stop that shaking your yas-yas-yas.

Well, the old folks do it and the young folks too,
And the old folks show the young folks just what to do,
Well now you shake your shoulders, you shake them fast,
And if you can't shake your shoulders, shake your
yas-yas-yas.

Well, Mr. Dillinger rode up to a gasoline station,
He says, "This looks like a pretty good location."
The attendant says, "Do you want my gas?"
"Well, it's either your gas or your yas-yas-yas."

Way down yonder in Saint Augustine,
You know a black cat sat down on a sewing machine,
Well, you know that machine it sewed so fast,
It sewed ninety-nine stitches in his yas-yas-yas.

'Twas the night before Christmas and all through the
house,
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse,
Well now, out on the lawn there arose a big crash,
It was Santa Claus sliding on his yas-yas-yas.

Please See That My Grave Is Kept Clean A beautiful
version of this somewhat necrophiliac hymn, the only
hymn ever recorded by the legendary Blind Lemon
Jefferson. Dave lets the guitar speak for him now
and then in the traditional style of this song and
others like it. The actual process of dying is
described in a verse sometimes included,

"My heart stopped beating and my hands
grew cold,

It's then I knowed what the Bible told."
Blind Lemon recorded it in Chicago shortly before his
death. When Samuel Charters searched out his grave
in Couchman, Texas, he found it unmarked and covered
with weeds.

PLEASE SEE THAT MY GRAVE IS KEPT CLEAN

It's one kind favor I'll ask of you, one kind favor
I'll ask of you,
One kind favor I'll ask of you, Is see that my grave
is kept clean.

Two white horses in a line, two white horses in a line,
Two white horses in a line, they're going to take me
to my burying ground.

Have you ever heard that church bell moan? Have you
ever heard that church bell moan?
Have you ever heard that church bell moan? Then you
know another boy's dead and gone.

Have you ever heard that coffin sound? Have you ever
heard that coffin sound?
Have you ever heard that coffin sound? Then you know
another boy's in the ground.

You may dig my grave with a silver spade, you may dig
my grave with a silver spade.
You may dig my grave with a silver spade, you may lower
me down with a golden chain.

It's a long road that has no end, it's a long road that
has no end,
It's a long road that has no end, it's a long trail
that has no turn.

Tell Old Bill The best version of this on a record.
A fine piece of drama originally collected by Carl
Sandburg from a lady etcher in St. Louis. A touch of
the Everly Brothers and a guitar that comes on like
a freight train.

TELL OLD BILL

Tell old Bill when he come home, this morning,
Tell old Bill when he come home, this evening,
Tell old Bill when he comes home, you'd better leave
those down-town girls alone,
This morning, this evening, so soon.

Bill left here about half past eight, this morning,
Bill left here about half past eight, this evening,
Bill left here about half past eight; well, he left
here by the old front gate,
This morning, this evening, so soon.

Sal was home, she was a-baking bread, this morning,
Sal was home, she was a-baking bread, this evening,
Sal was home, she was a-baking bread; when she heard
the news that her Bill was dead,
This morning, this evening, so soon.

She said, "Oh no, that can't be so, this morning,
Oh no, that can't be so, this evening,
Oh no, that can't be so, my Bill left here about an
hour ago,
This morning, this evening, so soon."

They brought Bill home in the hurry-up wagon, this
morning,
They brought Bill home in the hurry-up wagon, this
evening,
They brought Bill home in the hurry-up wagon, it's
poor old Bill, how his toes were dragging,
This morning, this evening, so soon.

Repeat first verse.

Georgie and the IRT As set down by old A.P. Carter
in 1927, Georgie's last words were: "Nearer my God
to thee." His modern counterpart says simply,
"Screw the IRT." I can't seem to find out who wrote
this but it is a fine parody. As an added benefit,
it allows you to sing the sentimental original, A.P.'s
Engine 143, straight - as it should be sung.

(Dave Van Ronk adds that the author of this parody is
Larry Block, a professional novelist by day, and an
able satirist by night.)

GEORGIE AND THE IRT

Along come the IRT, a-cannonballing through,
From 242nd Street to Flatbush Avenue,
At 5:15 one Friday eve, she pulled into Times Square,
The people filled the station and Georgie, he was
there.

The people filled the station, they milled and massed
around,
And Georgie looked upon that train and it was
Brooklyn bound,
He vowed it was the train to board, the weekend not
to roam,
For Georgie was a shipping clerk, and Brooklyn was
his home.

The people filled the station, a million head or more,
Georgie used his elbows and his knees until he reached
the door,

But when he reached those portals, he could not take
the gaff,
The conductor shut the door on him and he cut poor
George in half.

The train pulled out of Times Square, the swiftest on
the line,
It carried poor George's head along but it left his
body behind,
Poor Georgie died a hero's death, his martyrdom's
plain to see,
And the very last words that Georgie said were:
"Screw the IRT."

So when you ride the IRT and you approach Times Square,
Incline your head a few degrees and say a silent
prayer,
For his body lies between the ties, amidst the dust and
dew,
And his head, it rides the IRT to Flatbush Avenue.

Hesitation Blues Leadbelly, in a bit of deadpan
humor, managed to quiet a rather noisy group by
introducing Hesitation Blues,

"This is another something around nineteen
hundred, (pause) and ten, nineteen
hundred and (pause) nine, nineteen hundred
and (pause) eight, and seven..." (Song -
and after the last chord) - "That's
nineteen hundred - way back."

A lighthearted blues, in which Van Ronk and Saint
Peter do all right.

HESITATION BLUES

Well, I'm standing on a corner with a dollar in my
hand,
I'm looking for a woman who's looking for a man,
Tell me, how long do I have to wait?
Can I get you now or must I hesitate?

Well, the eagle on a dollar says, "In God we trust,"
Woman says she wants a man but wants to see a dollar
first,
Tell me how long do I have to wait?
Can I get you now or must I hesitate?

Ain't never been to heaven but I've been told,
St. Peter taught the angels how to jelly roll,
Tell me, how long do I have to wait?
Can I get you now or must I hesitate?

A nickel is a nickel and a dime is a dime,
I got a house full of children, not one of them
mine,
Tell me, how long do I have to wait?
Can I get you now or must I hesitate?

Hootchy Kootchy Man A famous novelist recently wrote
over five hundred pages of advertisements for himself
but Van Ronk puts him to shame in four verses. A fine
example of the Delta-flavored newer blues sound with
enough of Muddy Waters' wild imagery for seven songs.
Also fine second guitar work by Dick Rosmini.

HOOTCHY KOOTCHY MAN

Gypsy woman told my mother, before I was born,
You got a boy child coming, Going to be a son of a gun
He's going to make them pretty women run, jump and
shout,
World's going to want to know, What's this all about?

CHORUS:

Yes, I am, everybody knows I am,
I'm a hootchy kootchy man, everybody knows I am.

I got a black cat bone, I got a mojo too,
I got John the Conqueror, I'm going to mess with you,
I'm going to make you girls take me by my hand,
And the world's going to know I'm a hootchy kootchy
man.

(CHORUS)

I got a .45 pistol on a .38 frame,
Shoots tombstone bullets with a ball and chain,
I'm drinking TNT, I'm smoking dynamite,
I hope some screwball tries to start a fight.

(CHORUS)

On the seventh hour of the seventh day,
Of the seventh month, the seven doctors say,
He was born for good luck, baby, don't you see,
I got seven hundred dollars, don't you mess with me.

(CHORUS)

Dink's Song Alan Lomax, whose father collected this song in a levee camp on the Brazos River in 1904, has written, "Dink's tune is really lost; what is left is the tender beauty of what she sang."² What was left has become one of America's most moving songs. Van Ronk shouts out the desperation of this woman who sipped Lomax's gin and sang as she scrubbed her man's clothes. "Someday I've going to wrap up his wet britches and shirts, roll 'em up in a knot, put 'em in the middle of the bed and tuck down the covers right nice. Then I'm going up the river where I belongs."³

DINK'S SONG

If I had wings like Nora's dove,
I'd fly up the river to the one I love,
Fare thee well, oh honey, fare thee well.

Early one morning, drizzling rain,
Yes, in my heart I felt an ache and pain,
Fare thee well, oh honey, fare thee well.

Woman I love, long and tall,
She moves her body like a cannonball,
Fare thee well, oh honey, fare thee well.

One of these mornings, won't be long,
You'll call my name and I'll be gone,
Fare thee well, oh honey, fare thee well.

River Come Down A bit of Caribbean Haiku.

RIVER COME DOWN

You take a stick of bamboo, you take a stick of bamboo,
You take a stick of bamboo, and throw it in the water.

CHORUS:

Oh, oh, oh, oh, Hannah,
Oh, oh, oh, oh, Hannah,
River, oh river, she come down,
River, oh river, she come down.

You travel on the river, you travel on the river,
You travel on the river, you travel on the water.

(CHORUS)

My home's across the river, my home's across the river,
My home's across the river, my home's across the water.

(CHORUS)

Just A Closer Walk With Thee New Orleans jazz bands swung this hymn coming back from the burying ground.

"Right out of the graveyard the drummer would throw on the snares, roll the drums, get the cats together, and light out."⁴

It was a joyous if temporary release from the Angel of Death. Sung slowly and simply, it can be strangely moving and I've seen it bring unexpected tears to the eyes of southern listeners.

Van Ronk sings it well and somehow arrives at a middle ground.

JUST A CLOSER WALK WITH THEE

Just a closer walk with Thee,
Grant it Jesus, if you please,
Well, daily walking close to Thee,
Let it be, Dear Lord, let it be.

Well, I am weak but Thou are strong,
Saviour, keep me from all wrong,
Daily walking arm in arm,
Let it be, Dear Lord, let it be.

Well, in this world of toil and snares,
If I falter, Lord, who cares?
Well, who but Thee my burden shares?
None but Thee, Dear Lord, none but Thee.

well, when this feeble life is o'er,
Pain and sorrow be no more,
Jesus guide me safely o'er,
Canaan's shore, sweet Canaan's shore.

Repeat first verse.

Come Back Baby The tragedy of the human situation is here, as it is in the best of the blues. We humans are faced with an impossible situation. How can we communicate?

"The way I love you, you'll never know,"
And yet we try and fail and try again,
"Come back baby, let's talk it over,
one more time."

COME BACK BABY

Hey, come back baby, Mama, please don't go,
Yes, the way I love you, you'll never know,
Well, come on back baby,
Let's talk it over, one more time.

I love you baby, tell the world I do,
I don't want nobody else but you,
Well, come on back baby, let's talk it over, one more time.

Long old train, mean engineer,
Took my baby, left me standing here,
Well, come on back baby, let's talk it over.

If I could holler like a mountain jack,
I'd climb the mountain, bring my baby back,
Well, come on back baby, let's talk it over.

Repeat first verse.

Spike Driver's Moan This is a practical song about a man who knows his limits and knows his mind. John Henry is a hero, but his hammer lies beside the road. John Henry is dead. Me, I'm going back to the red clay country, where I belong. Dave dramatized John Henry's death,

"Left his hammer there,
All covered with blood."

In the more introspective Furry Lewis version:

"He left his old hammer,
In a drizzling rain."

The buoyancy of the guitar instrumental is belied by the resignation and defeat of the words.

SPIKE DRIVER'S MOAN

This old hammer, it killed John Henry,
Won't kill me, won't kill me,
This old hammer, it killed John Henry, won't kill me.

John Henry left his hammer lying there,
On the side of the road, side of the road,
John Henry left his hammer lying there, all covered with blood.

Got a rainbow around my shoulder,
Shine like gold, shine like gold,
Got a rainbow around my shoulder, shine like gold.

Take this hammer and throw it in the river,
(Guitar)..... Yes, right on,
Take this hammer and throw it in the river.

Take this hammer and carry it to the captain,
Tell him I'm gone, yes, I'm gone,
Take this hammer and carry it to the captain, yes,
I'm gone.

It's a long ways from East Colorado,
To my home, yes, my home,

It's a long ways from East Colorado, that's where
I'm going.

Going back to that red clay country,
That's my home, yes, my home,
Going back to that red clay country, where I belong.

This old hammer killed John Henry,
Won't kill me, won't kill me,
This old hammer it killed John Henry, well, it won't
kill me.

Standing By My Window The rage and frustration -
"I'm standing by my window/Tears rolling down my
cheek," the lonely heartsickness of the blues are
in this song. The tune, and some of the verses,
are reminiscent of the venerable Mamie Desdume's
Blues, but it has a quality of its own. Any latent
sentimentality is dispersed by the verse in which
the singer asks, "Mama, who may your manager be?"

STANDING BY MY WINDOW

Well now, I'm standing by my window, tears rolling
down my cheeks,
Well now, I'm standing by my window, tears rolling
down my cheeks,
There stands the woman I love, stopping every man
in the world she meets.

Well, she stood on the corner, feet got soaking wet,
Well, she stood on the corner, feet got soaking wet,
She was begging each and every man in the world
she met.

Can't give a dollar, give me a lousy dime,
Can't give a dollar, give me a lousy dime,
You know I'm trying to feed that hungry man of mine.

Oh well, it's hard, when your woman's got another
man,
I say, it's hard, when your woman's got another man,
Well, you can't get her when you want her, got to
catch her when you can.

I was a blind fool, baby, but you opened up my eyes
and I see,
I was a blind fool, baby, but you opened up my eyes
and I see,
Well, can a poor fool ask a question? Mama, who may
your manager be?

Repeat first verse.

Willie the Weeper "O just, subtle, and all-conquer-
ing opium!"⁵ Sweeping chimneys is a drag. Will fell
in with evil companions. Smoked a little pot, went
on to bigger things. If only someone had given him
that Laredo, Texas address.

WILLIE THE WEEPER

Well, this is a story about Willie the Weeper,
Now, Willie the Weeper was a chimney sweeper,
He had the habit, boy, he had it bad,
Let me tell you about a dream he had.

CHORUS:

Dee dee dee dah dee dah, dee dee dee dah dee dah,
Bah dat en dat en da dah, dee dah dah.

Well, he went to the hophouse the other night,
Where he knew the lights were always shining bright.
Well, he called to the boy to bring him some hop,
Started in a-smoking like he'd never stop.

(CHORUS)

After he had smoked about a dozen pills,
He says, "This ought to cure for all my aches and ills,"
Turned on the sign and he went to sleep,
Dreamed he was a sailor on the ocean deep.

(CHORUS)

They played draw poker as they left the land,
He won a million dollars on the very first hand,

He played and he played until the crew went broke,
Then he turned them out and had another smoke.

(CHORUS)

He came to the island of Siam,
He rubbed his eyes and said, "I wonder where I am,"
He played craps with the king, he won a million more,
Had to leave the island, 'cause the king got sore.

(CHORUS)

He went to Monte Carlo where he played roulette,
He couldn't lose a penny 'cause he won every bet,
He played and he played until the bank went broke,
Then he turned around and had another smoke.

(CHORUS)

Well, then he thought he'd better be sailing for
home,
He chartered a ship and sailed away alone,
The ship hit a rock, he hit the floor,
The dope gave out and the dream was o'er.

(CHORUS)

That was the story about Willie the Weeper,
Willie the Weeper was a gen pox eater,
Someday a pill too many he'll take,
And dreaming that he's dead, he will forget to
wake.

(CHORUS)

Sweet Substitute Van Ronk's ironic tribute to the
great composer-pianist Jelly Roll Morton, who wrote
this song in the late thirties, hoping to make it in
the then big-time of swing. His forte was the pure
ragtime, combining a variety of rhythms and
brilliant technique, stiff, but often breathtaking.
He was performing nightly at the Jungle Inn,
Washington, D. C., playing his "antiquated" jazz
for scornful Negro swingsters and a handful of tweedy
college professors. Jelly was nothing if not an
operator. If the United States didn't want his
rags - why not a sweet substitute?

SWEET SUBSTITUTE

My gal went away, and she knew I'd miss her night
and day,
I just had to look around, ought to see what I
found.

Sweet substitute, sweet substitute,
She always tells me that she's mine, all mine,
Does everything I tell her, you know love is blind.
She's got such loving ways, got my poor heart in
a daze,

My new recruit is mighty sweet and cute,
You know I'm crazy 'bout my substitute.
Don't want no regulars, crazy 'bout my substitute.

Sweet substitute, sweet substitute,
She always tells me that she's mine, all mine,
Does everything I tell her, love is blind,
She's got such loving ways, got my poor heart in
a daze,

My new recruit is mighty sweet and cute,
You know I'm crazy 'bout my substitute,
Don't want no regulars, crazy 'bout my substitute.

FOOTNOTES

1. Leadbelly's Last Sessions, Folkways Records,
FA 2941.
2. Folksong, USA, by John Lomax, Duell, Sloan and
Pierce, New York, 1947.
3. Ibid.
4. Zutty Singleton, Jazz Begins, Atlantic Records
1297, New York.
5. Thomas de Quincey, Confessions of an Opium
Eater.