

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FS 3542

REV. GARY DAVIS
SUN IS GOING DOWN

RECORDED IN 1966 BY MARZETTE WATTS



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SIDE 1

1. Sun is Going Down 5:22
2. Oh, What a Beautiful City 3:32
3. Morning Train 4:00
4. Fast Stepping Time 4:15

SIDE 2

1. Birdshead Special 5:07
2. Long John 4:00
3. God's UnChanging Hand 4:20
4. We Are the Heavenly Father's
Children 5:14

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DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

COVER PHOTO BY DAVID GAHR

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Notes by David Jansen

Reverend Gary Davis was seventy years old when this recording was made, six years before his death in May of 1972. Although his masterful musicianship had already made him a living institution in blues and folk circles, he was still capable of springing musical surprises on his audience. The surprises were mutual, for when Davis had migrated from North Carolina to New York in the early 1940s to join his wife Annie (who had come north to work as a domestic) he never envisioned attaining any recognition for his efforts. "Everything I come across was surprising to me," he later generalized. Once in New York (after a brief stay in Mamaroneck, N.Y.), he recalled, "I didn't know what was gonna happen... I learned that you got to do some tall scratchin' for yourself to get somewhere."

For the next fifteen years or so, he "scratched" out a meager existence playing in Harlem on "any street that I could make a few dollars." The postwar and fifties folk revival that reaped bonanzas for fellow emigres like Josh White, Sonny Terry (an old playing partner), and Brownie McGhee (a partial imitator) almost completely overlooked Davis. Muggers did not, causing Davis to reflect upon his streetsinging: "I was glad to get away from it... I had more done to me than anywhere I'd been in my life—you don't have to go to sleep: you just sit down, and you're outta somethin'."

It was not until the early 1960s that Davis' true stature as an extraordinary guitar player became evident to folk and blues partisans, and not until the last five years of his life that concerts, record royalties, and guitar lessons managed to cushion him from poverty. Yet Davis was never embittered by obscurity or hardship, holding: "Some people think it don't take you no time to get you somewhere. You don't get nowhere in one night. Some people never get that far...because they get impatient: too hasty with themselves."

Instead of courting popularity, Davis pursued excellence. He worshipped two gods: the fundamentalist deity on whose behalf he preached intermittently over the last forty-odd years of his life, and the guitar that was a constant companion for practically his entire lifetime. His devotional attitude towards playing far removed him from the typical blues or gospel singer of his time, for whom music tended to be a party pastime, a means of earning a livelihood, or a platform from which to proclaim religious faith. If there was something of all these elements in Davis' own music-making, there was also an uncommon commitment to his instrument, one that he unfailingly transmitted to his closest students, such as Stefan Grossman, Woody Mann, and Larry Johnson.

Though he seldom flouted the fact, Davis proudly (and justly) considered himself among the elite of his profession, and he had little patience for guitar-playing that failed to measure up to his own standards of excellence. Only a few of his contemporaries, such as Blind Blake, commanded his unqualified respect, and none of them ever intimidated him (as he put it, "I never was shy around none of those guitar-players"). The chordal banality of the ordinary blues struck him as musical heresy. Despite the once-prevalent image of Davis as a turncoat blues artist, the spiritual, with its greater emphasis on a melodic line, was more ideally suited to him, and the two blues he recorded in 1935 (two years after becoming an ordained minister) were played as semi-instrumentals. Such gimmicks as using open chord tunings or fretting with a bottleneck (which he himself had learned during the First World War) did not appeal to him, though they were the most conventional approach for the gospel guitarist. That spiritual melodies were raw source material for his rich musical imagination rather than "folk" songs to be played as handed down is evident from unique treatment of traditional pieces like Samson and Meet Me At The Station. He liked to flirt with unorthodox keys (like B minor or F) and adapt instrumentals that lay outside the normal realm of black folk performance, like Sousa's Washington Post march, Maple Leaf Rag, and St. Louis Tickle. While such works might have been expected from black musicians who catered to a white clientele, Davis seems to have taken them up primarily for the intrinsic challenge and sheer enjoyment of playing them.

In the same spirit he amassed an immense repertoire that was far less redundant than the comparably proficient Blind Blake's. Neither a dozen Davis albums nor the excellent songbook compiled by Stefan Grossman (The Holy Blues, a 1970 Robbins Music publication containing no less than eighty titles) managed to exhaust it. Not only was the quality of Davis' rich output remarkable, but its stylistic constancy as well. He seemed completely impervious to the urban surroundings that so often seemed to stultify folk musicians, and from listening to his late recordings one would never suppose that Davis was a musician who spent nearly half his performing career in New York.

Yet Davis' style seemed similarly independent of his regional background. While his emphasis on flashy instrumentation and his fondness for fast-paced instrumentals in the key of C was evocative of East Coast guitarists like Blind Blake, the rhythmic and harmonic interplay between his singing and playing was unique. His rhythms were far more percussive and inventive than those of the typical East Coast guitarist,

and his sound tended to be much more somber than the light-textured, "hokum" flavor characteristic of East Coast musicians like Blake, Blind Willie McTell, or Blind Boy Fuller. There was an unpredictability in Davis' riffs that sometimes matched the zaniness found in the playing of Blind Lemon Jefferson, and corresponded to the off-beat code of behavior he once related to Larry Johnson: "Always keep the other party guessin'. Never let a man know—even think—what your next move will be. If you goin' to that door and that person know you're goin' there, walk to some other door first. Only way to survive."

Sheer survival was by no means an idle consideration to Davis: only one of his seven brothers and sisters lived beyond adolescence. He was born in 1896 on a farm near Laurens, South Carolina, a town in the northwest part of the state that then consisted of 1900 persons. His earliest recollections of local music included "a song about Darling, You're No More Mine; Bill Bailey, Won't You Please Come Home?" Around 1903 (a year after Bill Bailey was written) he began playing guitar on an eighteen dollar model his mother purchased for him. (He was then already playing harmonica, having learned from an uncle.) An elderly grandmother who was largely responsible for his upbringing helped foster his early taste for gospel songs. Another catalyst behind Davis' gospel leanings was the blindness that afflicted him either at birth or in infancy. In keeping with the cultural mores of his time and place, he interpreted his handicap as a divine omen: "If you got a dog, you don't want him to run around: you know the next thing you do is tie him. Sometimes God has a way of fixin' people... Those He love He chastize... And sometimes, you know, when God takes a man's sight He gives 'im something greater."

As a teenager Davis journeyed to Greenville, a market town thirty miles northeast of Laurens, and met the fabled Willie Walker (1896-1933), a local blind musician whose lone 1930 recording is one of the peaks of East Coast blues-playing. Together they worked in a string band formed around 1912 when Davis was a self-described "country boy." From Walker he learned such themes as Seven Sisters and Crow Jane;

later he would emulate the most spectacular riff of Walker's South Carolina Rag on his own recording, O Lord, Search My Heart. Another later-recorded guitarist Davis met in this period was Blind Simmie Dooley of Spartanburg, where Davis briefly attended blind school (learning organ) around 1915. "Simmie Sooley, he was just as good as any man I ever heard playin' a guitar, him and Willie Walker," Davis later said. Whereas both guitarists used a regular accompanist, Davis preferred to keep his own musical counsel. So, too, was he socially aloof from all of his musical cronies: "I didn't never do much visitin' around any of 'em... I'm a very poor hand about that; I figure that I could find other company."

In spite of his general distaste for professional friendships, Davis acquired numerous proteges while living in Durham, North Carolina in the mid-1930s. The most famous of these, of course, was Blind Boy Fuller (1909-1941), one of the few country blues guitarists of the thirties to achieve any recording success. At the time of their meeting Fuller is said to have known only bottleneck pieces in open E tuning; he subsequently acquired one of his three basic recording themes (a simplified version of Davis' I'm Throwin' Up My Hand) from Davis, as well as pieces like Mama Let Me Lay It On You and Twelve Gates To The City. It was apparently on Fuller's recommendation that Davis was visited by the manager of a local United Dollar store, J. B. Long, who took the pair to New York to record for the American Record Company in 1935, along with Bull City Red (another product of Davis' tutelage). "The man didn't like me," Davis afterwards recalled. "He paid the rest of the boys off, and he wanted me to wait for mine." Long's own recollection of Davis, as given to Kip Lorrell, was somewhat different: "If he'd a-had the voice that Blind Boy Fuller had, he woulda been on a circuit somewhere, 'cause he could really play... Sound just like... electric piano-playing... His playing of the guitar would sell you, but it didn't sell records." Nearly a generation would pass before Davis' intricate playing finally "sold" to an appreciative audience, and it will remain unsurpassed for generations to come.