

PRODUCED BY ANN CHARTERS AND SAM CHARTERS

RECORDED BY HARRY SMITH

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FSS 37560

Allen Ginsberg First Blues

RAGS, BALLADS AND HARMONIUM SONGS

SINGING AND ACCOMPANYING HIMSELF ON THE BENARES HARMONIUM



4 AM BLUES
NEW YORK BLUES
NEW YORK YOUTH CALL ANNUNCIATION
COME BACK CHRISTMAS
MACDOUGAL STREET BLUES
CIA DOPE CALYPSO
PUT DOWN YR CIGARETTE RAG
SLACK KEY GUITAR
SIRATOKA BEACH CROON
BUS RIDE BALLAD ROAD TO SUVA
PRAYER BLUES
DOPE FIEND BLUES

PHOTO BY ANN CHARTERS
COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

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ALLEN GINSBERG
Singing and accompanying himself
on the Benares Harmonium

SIDE A

- 1. 4 AM BLUES**
New York Blues
New York Youth Call Annunciation
- 2. COME BACK CHRISTMAS**
Macdougall Street Blues
- 3. CIA DOPE CALYPSO**
- 4. PUT DOWN YR CIGARETTE RAG**

SIDE B

- 1. SLACK KEY GUITAR**
Siratoka Beach Croon
- 2. BUS RIDE BALAD ROAD TO SUVA**
- 3. PRAYER BLUES**
- 4. DOPE FIEND BLUES**

All material from the book of the same name published by:
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NOTE ON HARRY SMITH TAPES

This collection is selected from tapes made on an old Wollensack recorded by Harry Smith in his room at the Hotel Chelsea around 1972 as part of his project "materials for the Study of Relation and Culture in the Lower East Side," late XX Century New York City. In addition to recording my own songs he taped Peter Orlovsky singing at that time; Gregory Gorse reading all *Gasoline* and recent writings probably unpublished to the present year; and many rapping, children's riddle & rhymes, and specialized street sound-arts.

4AM Blues, NY BLUES, Come Back Xmas, Macdougall St Blues, Slack Key Guitar & Siratoka Beach Croon are not issued elsewhere; later versions of these songs recorded 1976 & 1981 are scheduled for issue by John Hammond Records Spring 1982, under title, *First Blues*, a collection of 10 years' work with musician friends ensemble. The versions sung in this collection are early & basic; in the case of *Siratoka Beach Croon*, melody was improvised on the spot at Harry Smith's suggestion. I visited his room regularly every few weeks, often smoked strong herbs, and encouraged by his interest sang him all the songs I'd ever written. I listened often to Harry Smith's earlier Folkways American music collections: *Anthology of American Folk Music Vol. 1-Ballads, FA2951, Vol. 2-Social Music, FA2952, Vol. 3-Songs, FA2953*, and been a little inspired by Sam Charters' blues scholarship, so it is an odd synchronicity that these Smith tapes were edited for Folkways by Sam Charters.


Allen Ginsberg
Lower East Side N.Y.
February 10, 1982

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Allen Ginsberg

First Blues

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DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FSS 37560

RETURN TO ARCHIVE
CENTER FOR FOLKLORE PROGRAMS
AND CULTURAL STUDIES
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

Allen Ginsberg

First Blues

Rags, Ballads & Harmonium Songs 1971-74

PRODUCED BY ANN CHARTERS

RECORDED BY HARRY SMITH

Introductory note by Ann Charters

For many years the poet Allen Ginsberg has been working toward a merger of poetry and music in his public performances, and the record FIRST BLUES: Rags, Ballads & Harmonium Songs collects the musical numbers that he was performing during 1971-74. Along with the American writers Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Robert Lowell and Frank O'Hara, Ginsberg has revolutionized the writing of poetry in our time, and during his middle years he continues to experiment with verse forms and different kinds of poetic and musical expression.

Born in Newark, New Jersey on June 3, 1926, Ginsberg published his first book of poems, HOWL, in 1956. From the beginning it was his public readings of his poetry, as well as the publicity around the obscenity trial in San Francisco in which HOWL was judged to possess "redeeming social importance," that first attracted readers to his work. In the twenty-five years since the publication of HOWL, Ginsberg has continued to champion individual freedom and to explore in his poetry "how raw mind actually sings." His books include the titles KADDIS & OTHER POEMS: 1958-60; REALITY SANDWICHES: 1953-1960; PLANET NEWS: 1961-1967; MIND BREATHS: POEMS 1972-1977; and POEMS ALL OVER THE PLACE: MOSTLY SEVENTIES. Recently in recognition of Ginsberg's poetic achievement and his stature as one of our

major poets, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. As the critic Paul Christensen writes in the Dictionary of Literary Biography, Ginsberg is our "single most potent lyric voice discoursing on the national crises in ways that arouse and stimulate the young to take part in the political process. Now in his fifties, he is the venerated bard of resistance; his presence at poetry readings is serene and messianic; his podium is at once a pulpit of Buddhist wisdom and a clearing house of reformist priorities."

In the early 1960s, after a visit to India, Ginsberg began to chant mantras at his poetry readings, accompanying himself on a Benares harmonium belonging to his companion Peter Orlovsky. He also composed and recorded his own accompaniments to his performances of the Songs of Innocence and Experience of the English poet William Blake. But it wasn't until 1971, at the suggestion of his Tibetan Buddhist meditation teacher Chogyon Trungpa, that he began improvising his own texts to help free himself from all inhibition and achieve a fuller expression of his complete self, from base instinct to religious exaltation.

In 1975 Full Court Press published his simple, unembellished verse ballads and blues lyrics fit to a spare harmonic accompaniment as the book FIRST BLUES: RAGS, BALLADS & HARMONIUM SONGS 1971-74. Ginsberg's introduction to that book is also the best explanation of what he was trying to create in this new poetic form. On this LP recorded by Harry Smith in New York City in the mid-1970s, Ginsberg accompanies himself on his small Benares hand-pumped harmonium, but many of the songs were conceived with rock band accompaniment, and on some of these recorded performances Ginsberg hums and grunts "riffs" that were part of the band arrangements.

Here is Allen Ginsberg's introduction to FIRST BLUES.

EXPLANATION OF FIRST BLUES

Although I studied Piano & Violin unsuccessfully a year in the 'thirties, and sang in bathrooms and on bridges solitary in the next decades, I did not begin chanting until visit to India and Japan in 1963, where impressed by Prajnāparamita Sutra & Hare Krishna Mantra, I borrowed Peter Orlovsky's tiny Benares Harmonium and began singing these magic formulae in invariable C chord. I practiced that monochordal mantra-chanting all through the 'sixties at poetry readings, explaining that it was related to Poetry in measuring the breath through vocalization. Robert Duncan reminded me at Vancouver poetry conference 1963 that I used my body's inspiration more deeply in chanting Hare Krishna than I did in reciting my poetry.

In 1968 returning up Bayshore Highway on bus from visiting Neal Cassidy's household and touching silken bag of his ashes, I kept hearing musical fragments of Blake's *Grey Monk* moaning through my brain, and other fragments of Blake, including

Fayette, Fayette, thou'rt bought & sold,
And sold is the happy morrow
Thou gavest the tears of Pity away
In exchange for the tears of sorrow.

I experimented improvising music in F chord to the *Grey Monk* on a Uher tape machine given me as Christmas present 1965 San Francisco by Bob Dylan, who suggested that I learn an instrument and sang the *Grey Monk*

But vain the Sword & vain the Bow,
They never can work War's overthrow.

in Lincoln Park Chicago at political Convention time over microphone summer 1968, & sang it alone under a tree in the park to Phil Ochs, devout folk-singer. Police state shock despair experienced after kidnapping by Secret Service & frustration of peace protest marches opened me to the immediate poignance of Blake's songs, their prophetic simplicity, so returning to upstate NY gas-lit farmhouse I stayed up several nights pumping chords on an antique organ, improvising on tape tunes for the bulk of *Songs of Innocence & of Experience*—the inspiration for setting Blake's words, syllable by syllable according to vocal tones appropriate to their meaning, led me, by the time I reached Innocence's *Chimney Sweeper*, to discover a second chord, moving from C to F. I completed & recorded 22 of the songs using only 2 chords in 1969,¹ accompanied by helpful genius musicians including Jon Sholle, Don Cherry, Elvin Jones & Bob Dorough. Soon after that, street musician Gary Getz suggested that I adapt last lines of songs like *Spring* and *Nurses Song* to mantric refrain, repeated indefinitely long time as chorus with friend audience.

In San Francisco summer 1971 I recorded another album-length set of Blake songs, adding a few country-western changes suggested by Jon Sholle. I met Chogyam Trungpa, Tibetan Buddhist meditation teacher, whom I'd known briefly in the East. When I mentioned that I was fatigued by cross-country poetry readings he replied, "That's because you don't like your poetry." I said "What?" and he continued, "Why depend on a piece of paper when you recite poetry, don't you have your own mind, do like the great poets, like Mila-Repa, improvise spontaneously on the spot!" It was the same chal-

lenge that Kerouac had offered decades before, spontaneous mind-mouth tongue. I shaved my beard and began that night, improvising a stupid smart ditty rhyming June Moon and Beer Dear at his prompting after his dharma discourse. And the next night in Berkeley at benefit for N'yingma Meditation Center, got onstage with chorus and chanted over an hour with Harmonium Om Ah Hūm Vajra Guru Padma Siddhi Hūm and then with 2 chords did improvise a twenty minute lament, "How sweet to be born here in America..."

That Fall in NY Peter Orlovsky and I gave poetry reading at NYU in Greenwich Village, and improvised for an hour on the theme "Why write poetry down on paper when you have to cut down trees to make poetry books?" following a thought Gregory Corso'd writ, "No good news can be written on bad news." Unbeknownst to us Bob Dylan was in the audience, in the rear with old musician fellow-actor companion Dave Amram. Dylan phoned that night and asked, "Can you make up words like that anytime?" and came over Lower East Side apartment, picked up guitar, played various blues chords and latin rhythms & I sat on edge of bed and tongued syllables & sentences rhymed fast as I could to "I'm going down to Puerto Rico." So Dylan pleased by this proficiency said "Why dont we go into a studio and record?"

The first songs in this book are products of those sessions November 17 & 20 1971, and *September on Jessore Road (Fall of America)* was written between sessions to offer Dylan a text equal to his own genius and sympathy. Songs were written in studio while musicians waited, run over once, and recorded, choruses and breaks arranged much by Dylan. *Many Loves* and *Jimmie Berman Rag*, were improvised accidentally, in one take, and I've left texts awkward untouched.

I started going to folk music concerts, *Happy Traum* had played with us in studio, at one of his concerts in Peace Church N.Y. December 20 I got inspired to imitate common song style & wrote words for *NY Blues* and *NY Youth Call Annunciation* in pocket notebook in my pew, listening to his Woodstock folk band. In the last month Dylan and others had explained the use of third chord (14151)—C F G—I still hadn't mastered that transition during the recording sessions, confusing musicians with my insistence that Jessore Road was a Blues)—and so I set out composing traditional twelve bar blues by Christmas

Radiator Cockroach
Waving your horns at the wall
What'll I feed you
I don't eat meat at all
Go tell the bedbug
He better stay out in the hall

By this time I had picked up a copy of Sackheim's² breath-stop-arranged transcriptions of classic blues, and was modeling my first blues on Richard Rabbit Brown's *James Alley Blues*, heard on Harry Smith's collection of American Folk Songs³.

Sam Charters scholar reminded me that old blues & calypso were a vehicle for low down funky sex thoughts (& politics), "I got nipples on my titties as big as your thumb" was that Ma Rainey singing? I'd listened to blues Paterson N.J. high school days over WNYC radio—heard Leadbelly program live for a year, *Irene* & later *Black Girl* haunted me like Eli Eli—and heard Ma Rainey's *CC Rider* & *Jellybean Blues*, Bessie Smith's *Empty Bed*, *Baby Doll* & *Christmas Blues*, & later with Kerouac

and Huncke in 'forties heard Billie Holiday's *Fine & Mellow* & *Hush Now Dont Explain*—and I'd sung ragged ditties & tocattas & fugues with Kerouac under Brooklyn Bridge in 1945-49 and listened with him and Neal Cassady to car radio Rhythm and Blues of Louis Jordan & Fats Domino & moans of Slim Gaillard & shrieks of Little Richard, so I had some kind of American Blues in my heart without knowing it—I could sing but didn't reckon it important poetically, until I met Krishna & remembered Ezra Pound's ken that poetry & music, song & chant (and dance) went together before the invention of the printing press and long after—forgotten by the same academies that forgot that the genre of American Black Blues & rags was as great a treasury of poetics as Bishop Percy's *Reliques* & Scottish Border Ballads & Elizabethan song books & Tom 'O Bedlam folk treasures.

In the course of working with adept musicians for recording to fix Blake tunes for future generations I began to notate melodies crudely, developing child-simple lead sheets handy & workable for fast pick-up of the melodies—a sample of that's given in notation of the last song *Guru Blues*. As most of the earlier songs were developed in improvisation & practice before poetry audiences without lead sheets, the bulk of the music was notated by Buddhist pop star Arthur Russell who taught me new chords & played cello on Blake & later Dylan recording sessions.

The doggerel element in the poetry has to be dealt with—perceptive doggerel inexcusable & inevitable in the process of learning to sing and making up words on the spot. The ideal as in *Campion & Nashe* is series of swift images, Dylan's "Chains of flashing images." Music carries senseless vowels, which could be revised but in keeping with the spirit of this Art I've left most first drafts & improvisations fixed in their original wordings, useful to myself & others to see how raw mind actually sings.

1. *Songs of Innocence and of Experience Tuned by Allen Ginsberg*, M.G.M., NY 1969, Verse/Forecast FTS3083, reissued M.G.M., 1974
2. Eric Sachheim, *The Blues Line*, New York Grossman, 1969.
3. *American Folk Songs*, vols. I and II, New York, Folkways Records, 1952

Allen Ginsberg
Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics
Naropa Institute, Boulder, Colorado
June 30, 1975

4 AM Blues

4 AM BLUES

Oh when you gonna
lie down by my side
When the spirit hits you
please lie down by my side
Three nights you didnt come home
I slept by myself & sighed

O when you gonna
look me in the eyes
When the spirit hits you
look me in the eyes
Oh honey come hug me
take me by surprise

Take me by surprise
come home, lie down by my side
Away three days
Sometimes I cried
Lie here alone
Heart open wide

Gone another night
Hand on my heart close my eye
You dont want me in your arms
dont want to hear me sigh
That's how I'm alone,
That's how I'm going to die.

Dec. 20, 71
(Traum Folk Concert)

New York Blues

NEW YORK BLUES

Walking blues (andante)

I live in an apartment, sink leaks thru the walls
Lower Eastside full of bedbugs, Junkies in the halls
House been broken into, Tibetan Tankas stole
Speed freaks took my statues, made my love a fool
Speed freaks took my statues, made my love a fool

Days I came home tired nights I needed sleep
Cockroaches crawled in bed with me my brain began to creep
My work was never done, my rest'll never begin
I'll be dead and buried and never pleasure win
I'll be dead and buried and never pleasure win

Lover boy threw meat at me cursed the day we met
Speed freaks and bedbugs New York City's what you get
Someday they'll build subways get rid of all the cars
Cops kill all the bedbugs speed freaks land on Mars
Cops kill all the bedbugs speed freaks land on Mars

December 1971

CIA Dope Colypso

in nineteen hundred forty five, China was won by Mao Tse Tung
 Chiang Kai Shek's army ran away and they're waiting there in Thailand today, sup-
 ported by the CIA pushing just down Thailand way
 His best friend General Vang Pao
 ran our Meo Army like a sacred cow helicopter smugglers filled
 Long Chang bars in Xieng Quang province on the plain of Jars. It
 started in secret and they're fighting there today Claudine army of the
 CIA All through the sixties the dope flew from
 Tan Son Nhut Saigon to Marshall Ky Air America follows through
 porting confiture for President Thieu All those dealers were doc-
 ades and today the Indo-Chinese Mob of the US CIA.

LITHO IN U.S.A. 

Prayer Blues

when you break your bones there's nothing to
 stand on break your leg nothing to
 stand on Break your bones there's nothing to
 stand on break up your body nowhere to be
 Jesus Christ nowhere to be
 christ show me Jesus
 Christ show me the way to go home Jesus
 christ have mercy on me