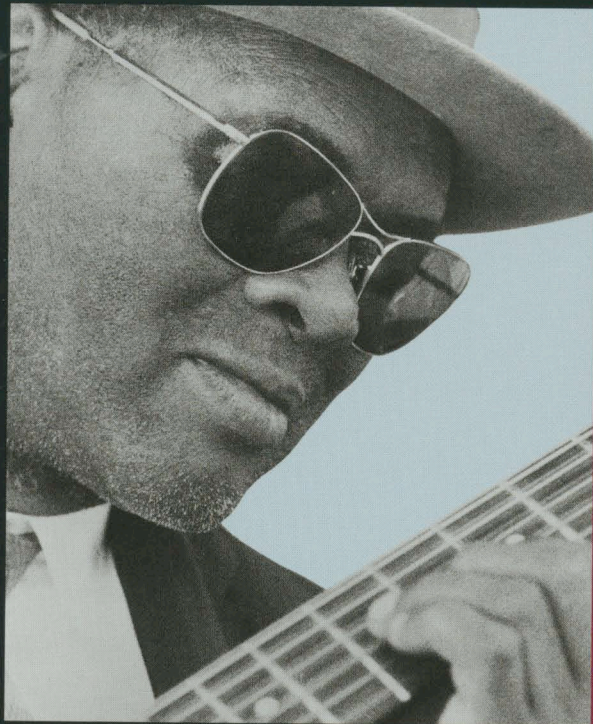


REVEREND GARY DAVIS



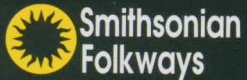
Pure

Religion

&

Bad

Company



Smithsonian/Folkways Records
Office of Folklife Programs
955 L'Enfant Plaza, Suite 2600
Smithsonian Institution
Washington DC 20560
P C 1991 Smithsonian/Folkways Records

Printed in Canada

REVEREND GARY DAVIS

Pure Religion and Bad Company

1. **Pure Religion** 4:17
2. **Mountain Jack** 3:28
3. **Right Now** 2:55
4. **Buck Dance** 2:50
5. **Candy Man** 2:32
6. **Devil's Dream** 1:57
7. **Moon Goes Down** 4:44
8. **Cocaine Blues** 2:38
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12. **I Didn't Want to Join the Band** 3:06
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15. **My Heart is Fixed** 2:05
16. ***Time is Drawing Near** 2:48
17. ***Crucifixion** 7:49

* Previously unreleased material.

All songs published by Chandos Music (ASCAP) except "Candy Man", published by Warner Bros. Music. All songs composed, or adapted/arranged by Rev. Gary Davis.

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Recorded by Fred Gerlach and Tiny Robinson, June 1957,
in New York, N.Y.



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"You must have religion in your soul" says Rev. Gary Davis at the start of these recordings. It was the crux of his music; the music of a man who has seen the light. He was always something of a paradox; a fiercely religious man whose guitar playing was superior to that of his blues-playing peers. He remains one of the truly great folk artists; instantly recognizable and ever inventive.

*From the enclosed notes
by Bruce Bastin*

Previously issued as Folklyric FL125 and
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Mitch Greenhill

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Cover photo courtesy of Manny Greenhill



**Smithsonian
Folkways**

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Reverend Gary Davis

Pure Religion and Bad Company

Smithsonian/Folkways SF 40035

Recorded in 1957 and originally issued on 77 Records, London
Descriptive notes enclosed
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1991

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The Life and Career of Blind Gary Davis by Bruce Bastin

"You must have religion in your soul" says Davis at the start of these recordings. It was the crux of his music; the music of a man who has seen the light. In these recordings—the third album of his career—there is an empathy of voice and guitar that is uncanny at times. His guitar frequently finishes off vocal lines and he often instructs, or perhaps chides, his "Miss Gibson" to "talk" to him.

Like many talented folk musicians, Davis was always seeking to add runs and embellish notes, partly to demonstrate his complete mastery of the piece but partly as a comment on his own skills as a musician—a sense of professional pride. Listen to the way so many of his numbers end with his "trademark." He was a brilliant musician who led a difficult life as a deeply religious performer.

One of eight children, only two of whom survived childhood, Gary Davis was born of farm stock in rural South Carolina on April 30th, 1896. Brought

up by a grandmother, Davis was playing guitar by the time he was eight and singing in the Baptist church. Two years later his father was killed, but by then Davis was leading a thoroughly independent life. He was a loner until his 40s, when he married.

By the time Davis was fifteen, he was playing in the Greenville string band, which included another superb guitarist, Willie Walker, whom Davis later rated a "master player." Within a few years Davis was accepted at the Institution for the Education of the Deaf and Blind in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Although he did not remain there long, he taught music. Twenty-five years later, he told a welfare worker that he had never learned to read music "but presumed it was like other reading" (this and all other quotations are from Bruce Bastin, *Red River Blues* [University of Illinois Press 1986]) by which he meant Braille, which he had learned in the school for the blind.

For some years, Davis travelled throughout the Carolinas. He was known to the welfare authorities in Durham, North Carolina, as early as 1919, although he probably did not take up permanent residence there until 1931, when his mother settled in the town. A cable from the Superintendent of Public Welfare in Wilson, N.C. to his Durham counterpart W.E. Stanley requested him to "meet Gary Davis blind and direct late night train." Soon after, Mr. Stanley wrote the Durham Chief of Police requesting a permit for Davis "to play guitar and sing in the colored section, Friday July 17th...for this date only." Brownie McGhee, years later, also told of police permits being required.

In 1935, a new manager was brought in to run the United Dollar Store on Durham's West Club Boulevard. J. B. Long had recently acquired a taste for recording folk musicians—Black and White—while working in nearby Kinston. One day, hoping to attract farmers from the tobacco warehouses to his store, he heard a blind bluesman, Fulton Allen, playing the guitar. During Long's summer vacation an improbable sextet headed for New York to record: Long, his wife and daughter, Blind Boy Fuller (Fulton Allen), Gary Davis, and George Washington. Washington, the only sighted Black, was Fuller's lead/guide, and also played guitar. The session was for the American Record Corporation (ARC) and Long was fortunate that the A&R manager was Edward Arthur Satherley. Art Satherley had come from England via

the Wisconsin Chair Company, which issued perhaps the finest country blues of the 1920s on Paramount records, enabling him to mix easily with rural Black artists, who were sometimes confused by the unfamiliar studio environment. Washington, who recorded under the name of Bull City Red (Durham was called Bull City, after a local tobacco), sat behind the blind men to touch them on the arm, as a signal to end the recording. Davis found it hard to stop inside 2 1/2 minutes. Fuller, who learned many blues from records, found it easier.

The first session was held on Tuesday, July 23, 1935, commencing with a pair of tough blues from Davis, who by Thursday refused to play any more blues. All his subsequent recordings that summer were religious, although he continued to play "Cross and Evil Woman Blues" and "I'm Throwing Up My Hand" around the tobacco warehouses, as other musicians well remember. Long also found Davis' vocal to be "grating" and on one title from the Wednesday session ("I Saw the Light") the vocal is by Bull City Red, but Davis' guitar accompaniment is superb. The following day his insistence on religious material did not prevent Davis from accompanying Fuller on two blues. Fortunately, these 1935 titles have been assembled on an album (see the "other recordings" listed below).

Davis' time in Durham was fraught with personal problems. Although he received considerable help from the Department of Public Welfare, he faced conflict over his income from playing the guitar. As one caseworker noted, "he might be playing around... to pick up a little change." That's probably all it was, a "little change," but thirty years later when I was such a caseworker in a parallel South Carolina welfare department, the problem would have been the same. When Fuller threatened to pull out of a projected session in the summer of 1939 for Long, because his welfare check might be canceled, Long—in some desperation—contacted Davis as a possible replacement, but Davis told his caseworker that he hadn't been offered enough. Whatever the reason, Davis was not to record again until 1945, and by then he had relocated in New York City.

While in Durham, Davis was an insular man, beset by torment of his own making. Like some very religious people, Davis' conversion to the Faith—he had been ordained in the summer of 1937—brought with it renewed anxiety and a fervor to

convert others. This proselytizing zeal never left him and can be heard at times on these 1957 recordings. His Durham landlady recalled how he had sat up late one night reading his (Braille) bible when he caught fire, and she prevented him from being severely burned. More than one caseworker had a sermon preached at her, and one was clearly disturbed because he was "playing with a very large pocket knife." One, who "wondered if he had been playing somewhere" (and had read his file closely), "urged him to play me a number." "His ability as a guitarist is unbelievable" she added. "I have never heard better playing."

Davis seldom mixed with other local musicians, although they all respected his skills. Local Durham bluesman Willie Trice recalled that Art Satherley had termed Davis "the playingest man he'd ever seen" and was himself in awe of Davis. Asked if he had ever played with Davis, Trice ruefully replied that he hadn't, but that "he let me use his guitar." Davis never rated Fuller as a musician, and said of him that "he would have been all right if I kept him under me long enough."

In 1944 Davis moved to the Bronx to become a self-styled guitar evangelist in the urban North, but it took ten years before he was recorded in depth, first by Moses Asch (these appeared on the Stinson label) and then by Riverside. Many albums followed, especially for Prestige/Bluesville, then for Stefan Grossman, and Davis soon became a featured artist of the folk scene.

Davis was always something of a paradox; a fiercely religious man whose guitar playing was always superior to that of his blues-playing peers. True, he later recorded blues again, despite his supposed refusal to do so, but in fact he was never musically far from them. His technique had few equals and his style was inimitable. He remains one of the truly great folk artists; instantly recognizable and ever inventive.

Many recordings were made of Gary Davis but this was the third album he recorded, and it is a joy to have it available once more.

The Recordings

1. **Pure Religion.** "You must have religion in your soul," orders Davis. His declamatory style is well demonstrated in this opening title, on which his guitar closely follows the vocal lines, at times creating an effective duet.

2. **Mountain Jack.** The inappropriately titled "Mountain Jack" is kin to a blind Boy Fuller melodies, for example "Painful Hearted Blues," and shows Davis' supreme handling of an instrumental blues. He tended not to sing the words to the blues until his later years, but this did not seem to have stopped his playing them as instrumentals. "Mountain Jack" is

redolent of everything about Carolina blues. A beautiful and touching number, Davis twice plays a set of note clusters somewhat alien to blues in order to achieve a different sound. It is easy to forget just how important sound was to him. When Davis was performing at Harold Darling's Sign of the Sun bookstore in San Diego in 1962, Lou Curtiss took Davis out to the famous zoo. He had to drag Davis away from the sea-lions, whose barking fascinated him.

3. Right Now. The central theme of Davis' proselytizing always was: "don't put off today for tomorrow for tomorrow may never be." "Come out of sin," he says, with the assurance held by the saved.

4. Buck Dance is a marvelous example of Davis' technique and sense of time. He tows this little dance tune away from its roots and imbues it with nothing short of magic. If you can sit still while this is playing, then—as Louis Jordan said—"Jack, you dead!"

5. Candy Man is best known from Mississippi John Hurt's numerous versions, when it became a coffee-house "must" in the 1960s. Hurt, however, "sanitized" his versions somewhat, whereas Davis retains hints like "big legged Ida" of other stanzas that gave the song a different direction. Davis uses a throw-away vocal style similar to Hurt's. This is an old tune, learned before World War I from Will Bonds, a founder-member of the Greenville string band in which Davis played.

6. In Devil's Dream. Davis explains it is all about the devil dreaming of the number of souls he is going to get. This was one of Davis' concerns, too. In 1937 a Welfare worker stated that Davis was involved with "work concerned with saving souls." Not content to play it straight, Davis embellishes the stop-time quality of the tune, reminiscent of Buck Dance with ragtime overtones.

7. One of Davis' most effective songs, **Moon Goes Down** has the quality of a field holler: the anguished, racked vocal crying out above gloomy guitar figures, lined out with heavy repetition. Almost as if he knows the emotional impact of the piece when heard for the first time, Davis plays the guitar solo high up on the neck of the instrument, paralleling the torment of his voice. It is Davis' ability to create such an impact on a dirge-like song such as this, while exuding sheer joy on faster instrumentals, that singles him out as a special performer.

8. After the previous selection, **Cocaine Blues** may have been selected to lighten the tone of the album. If there is such a thing as a collective folk music memory or shared aesthetic in North Carolina, then "Coco Blues" is a part of it. It recalls instantly the delicate playing of Elizabeth Cotten

(Smithsonian/Folkways SF 40009) and the little known Algia Mae Hinton.

9. Runnin' to the Judgement. Gary Davis always maintained that Blind Blake was the greatest guitarist he ever heard on record and Blake's style can be heard on the run into Davis' opening words here, as well as in later guitar bridges. The interplay between voice and guitar is especially fine.

10. Hesitation Blues is a beautiful example of Davis' effortless finger picking, leisurely floating over delicate runs and progressions, with an understated timing and sensitivity. As much as any track here, this one shows his attention to detail and his affinity with ragtime-based blues.

11. Bad Company. The words are too vague to be biographical, but Davis interestingly associates himself with the victim: "the poor boy could not eat—I couldn't either." The imagery is powerful: "all my veins are goin' to stop" when "they gonna screw that death-cap on my head." Perhaps the work of the devil in inducing "bad company" was sufficient to elicit sympathy. The sensitivity with which the guitar "talks" to him contrasts vividly with the atmosphere of impending death.

12. I Didn't Want to Join the Band exhibits Davis' full range of guitar skills, perhaps equivalent to James P. Johnson's use of "Carolina Shout" when Harlem stride piano players met. "Follow that" it said, establishing an immediate pecking order. During the tobacco sales season, when outlying farmers were flush with money for the first time in months, the best bluesmen could be heard attempting to relieve them of some. Davis was among those who played and was remembered by local musicians for not playing until someone paid him enough to do so. He was never moved on by a better musician.

13. Evening Sun has fill-ins of superb, fast finger picking, so reminiscent of the best Carolina musicians like Greenville's Blind Willie Walker and Josh White. Davis yielded only to Blind Blake in his respect for Walker's playing, and it is typical of his technique that he chooses to play the guitar breaks so high on the frets.

14. Seven Sisters. The origins of this song are obscure. A pretty blues, it would seem to have no connection with the usual reference to voodoo queens in New Orleans.

15. My Heart is Fixed is sung to the tune of "Twelve Gates to the City," one of Davis' favorite hymns, and one that Blind Boy Fuller recorded less than a year before his death.

16. Time Is Drawing Near. Some of Davis' songs are more in the tradition of epic prose. They avoid the formulaic approach of the hellfire preacher, but tell a story. The guitar

sounds so full and sonorous in his hands; the musical theme familiar. "Sing it yourself" he exhorts Miss Gibson. As proof that Blind Boy Fuller learned a little from him, listen to the "Fullerish" exit.

17. Crucifixion. Typical of Davis' delivery, this is as much a monologue as a song, with pretty guitar skills set in counterpoint to the vocal projection of his fervor. A lesser artist would have used powerful, strummed guitar lines to emphasize his voice.

Recommended Additional Reading:

Bruce Bastin, **Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the Southeast.** Urbana; University of Illinois Press 1986.

Stefan Grossman, **Reverend Gary Davis: Blues Guitar.** New York: Oak Publications 1974.

Recommended Discographies:

Paul Oliver, **Blackwell Guide to Blues Records.** Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1989. This is a guide to the best of blues on record and is effectively a discography of albums then available. Reissues of recordings by Blind Boy Fuller, Blind Willie Walker, Blind Blake, etc. may be found here.

R.M.W. Dixon and J. Godrich, **Blues and Gospel Records 1902 - 1943.** Chigwell (England): Storyville Publications 1982. This is the ultimate discography.

Other Recordings by Gary Davis:

I Am the True Vine (1962-63) Heritage (UK) HT 307
Children of Zion (1962 Concert) Heritage (UK) HT 308 LP
Reverend Gary Davis (1935-1949) Heritage (UK) HT 309 LP
Reverend Gary Davis (Heritage CD 02 combines HT 308 and HT 309)
At the Sign of the Sun (1962 San Diego, California) CD 03
Reverend Gary Davis (1935-1949) Yazoo L-1023
When I Die I'll Live Again Fantasy 24704 (2 record set) (formerly Prestige 1015 - *Harlem Street Singer* and Prestige 1032 - *A Little More Faith*)
Say No To the Devil Bluesville 1049
The Guitar and Banjo of Rev. Gary Davis Prestige 7725
Pure Religion! Prestige 7805
Children of Zion Kicking Mule 101
Ragtime Guitar Kicking Mule 106
O, Glory Adelphi 1008
The Legendary Rev. Gary Davis, Vol. 1 Biograph 12030E
Lord I Wish I Could See, Vol. 2 Biograph 12034E
Rev. Gary Davis at Newport Vanguard 73008
1935-1949 Yazoo 1023

Stefan Grossman has produced four cassettes, without release numbers:

Babylon is Falling

Lo' I Be With You Always
Let Us Get Together
I Am the True Vine

Grossman has also produced a guitar series entitled *The Guitar of Reverend Gary Davis* in six lessons. His materials are available from P.O. Box 802, Sparta, New Jersey 07871

Related Recordings:

Blind Boy Fuller: Truckin' My Blues Away (Yazoo L-1060); *Travelin' Man* (UK) TM CD 01.

Blind Blake: Ragtime Guitar's Foremost Picker (Yazoo 1068 double album).

Blind Willie Walker: East Coast Blues (Yazoo L-1013). This anthology has two tracks by walker—his entire recorded output—and one by Blind Blake.

In addition to these, Folkways Records issued a large number of blues recordings between 1947 and 1987, all of which remain available on audio cassette with the original notes through the Smithsonian Institution. For further information write the Office of Folklife Programs, 955 l'Enfant Plaza suite 2600, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D. C. 20560 USA; or fax 202/287-3699; or telephone 202/287-3262.

Recent Smithsonian/Folkways blues reissues on CD and cassette (remastered, usually with new notes and often including previously unreleased material) include:

Leadbelly and Woody Guthrie, *Folkways: The Original Vision.* SF 40001 CD, CS, LP. A compilation from various albums presented in the same sequence as the interpretations of Leadbelly and Guthrie songs on the CBS album *Folkways: A Vision Shared.*

Elizabeth Cotten, *Freight Train and Other North Carolina Folk Songs and Tunes.* SF 40009 on CD, CS, and LP (original Folkways number 3526).

Leadbelly Sings Folk Songs. SF 40010 on CD, CS, and LP (original Folkways number 31006).

Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee Sing SF 40011 on CD, CS, and LP (original Folkways number 2327).

Lightnin' Hopkins. SF 40019 on CD, CS, and LP. (Original Folkways number 3822).

Big Bill Broonzy Sings Folk Songs. SF 40023 on CD, CS, and LP (Original Folkways number 2328).

Sonny Terry, The Folkways Years (an anthology drawn from 8 LPs and two previously unissued recordings), compiled and annotated by Kip Lornell. SF 40033 on CD and CS (A spring 1991 release).

Brownie McGhee, The Folkways Years (an anthology drawn from 6 LPs and two previously unissued recordings), compiled and annotated by Kip Lornell. SF 40034 on CD and CS. (A spring 1991 release)

This insert accompanies Smithsonian/Folkways SF 40035