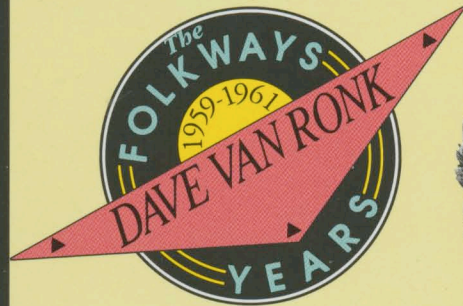




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DAVE VAN RONK**The Folkways Years 1959-61****A compilation from his Folkways Recordings****Compiled and annotated by Kip Lornell & Dave Van Ronk**

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1. **Duncan and Brady** 3:00
2. **Hesitation Blues** 2:32
3. **In The Pines** 3:04
4. **Willie The Weeper** 2:47
5. **Twelve Gates To The City** 3:12
6. **River Come Down** 3:43
7. **Careless Love** 2:56
8. **Betty and Dupree** 3:34
9. **Bed Bug Blues** 2:43
10. **Leave Her Johnny** 1:26
11. **Yas, Yas, Yas,** 2:05
12. **Please See That My Grave Is Kept Clean** 2:54
13. **Winin' Boy** 2:35
14. **Just A Closer Walk With Thee** 3:00
15. **Gambler's Blues** 2:42
16. **Spike Driver's Moan** 3:11
17. **Georgie on the IRT** 3:28
18. **Come Back Baby** 3:51
19. **Black Mountain Blues** 4:00
20. **My Baby's So Sweet** 2:32

I never really thought of myself as a "folksinger" at all. Still don't. What I did was to combine traditional fingerpicking guitar with a repertory of old jazz tunes. This then is the first recorded statement not of a folk musician, but of a kind of jazz singer manqué. I like to think I was starting to get the hang of it.

—Dave Van Ronk

From the enclosed notes.



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Folkways**

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Credits

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Kenneth Goldstein

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and Dave Van Ronk

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The Mastering Lab, Hollywood California

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DAVE VAN RONK, THE FOLKWAYS YEARS 1959-61

Compiled and Annotated by Kip Lornell and Dave Van Ronk

SF 40041 Dave Van Ronk

The Folkways Years 1959-61

A compilation from his Folkways

Recordings

Compiled and annotated by Kip Lornell
and Dave Van Ronk

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Recordings

Reflections on this Recording by Dave Van Ronk

In 1955, after a particularly horrendous gig with a pick-up trad. jazz group in New Jersey replete with drunken fraternity boys, a 50% pay back to the contractor, and my first on-stage experience with the demon marijuana (my pick kept missing the banjo strings), it seemed to me that my future as a jazz musician was due for an agonizing reappraisal. The Traditional Jazz revival of the '40s and early '50s was definitely over. The survivors were a few cornballs in funny hats, moonlighting insurance execs., and a handful of dedicated musicians gumping meals at the automat. (Gumping is when you race the busboy to an unfinished plate of food, finish it, and repeat the procedure until you are no longer hungry or you are thrown out—whichever comes first.) My formal education had ended decisively three years earlier when I was expelled from Richmond Hill High for mopey and general moral turpitude, so a career in comparative philology or nuclear physics appeared less than probable. There was no G.I. Bill for veterans of the Moldy Fig Wars. In any case, I was hooked. Except for vague yearnings to be an archaeologist and find a lost city or two, I had never wanted to be anything but a musician.

I had acquired a ukelele when I was twelve, and my first guitar a year later (given to me by a grammar school classmate, Conrad Fehling—thanks heaps, Connie). The banjo was a later accretion; I never liked the banjo—it clanged like some kind of wind-up toy, and I never learned to play it well. But no matter. Traditional jazz had to have a banjo, so I clanged away, occasionally hitting the right chord, tolerated by my confreres mainly because I didn't mind doing vocals and I sang real loud. Still, aesthetics aside, the gigs were drying up and I was getting very hungry.

Of course I was aware of the folk music thing in Washington Square. I had been hanging around the Village for a few years by this time, and the sight and sound of happily howling Stalinists

offended my assiduously nurtured self-image as a hipster, not to mention my political sensibilities, which were at the time vehemently L.W.W.-anarchist. (To this day, I cherish a deep-seated loathing for anything that smacks of good, clean fun.) In due course I came to realize that there were some very good musicians operating on the fringes of the radical Rotarian sing-alongs: pickers and singers like Tom Paley, Dick Rosmini, and Fred Gerlach, who were playing music cognate with early jazz, with a subtlety and directness that simply blew me away. The technique they employed was called "fingerpicking," wherein the right thumb keeps time—not unlike the left hand in the stride piano playing I was already familiar with—while the index and middle fingers pick out melodies and harmonies. What struck me most forcefully was that if you can do this you don't need a band. I immediately cast off my carefully cultivated snobbery and set out to learn. Like the man said: "Sometimes you have to forget your principles and do what's right."

What all this boils down to, I suppose, is a kind of confession; I never really thought of myself as a "folksinger" at all. Still don't. What I did was to combine traditional fingerpicking guitar with a repertoire of old jazz tunes, many of which I had been singing for years. These recordings from '59 and '61, I regard as a journeyman's progress report. Kenny Goldstein, who kindly set up the arrangement with Folkways and produced the first album, told me I should hold off a year or so, and he was probably right. There were lots of kinks that needed ironing out.

This then is the first recorded statement not of a folk musician, but of a kind of jazz singer manqué. I like to think I was starting to get the hang of it.

The Songs

1. Duncan and Brady.

I don't think there have ever been two singers as unlike one another as Paul Clayton and myself. Yet Paul had considerable influence on me, as he did somewhat later on Bob Dylan. I think it was the way he had with a lyric. He was not only a singer of great talent, but a folklorist and collector of songs in the field. Paul collected this song on one of his field trips, and taught it to me. The character "Old King Brady" was lifted from a popular dime novel series circa 1890-1900. The electric car image and the refrain "He's been on the job too long" strike me as especially vivid.

2. Hesitation Blues.

I learned this from Gary Davis around '56, although I was singing something very much like it a few years earlier with a group fetchingly called "The Brute Force Jazz Band."

3. In the Pines.

From the Kossoy sisters, Irene and Ellen, whom I met in Washington Square. They were identical twins (still are) with perfectly matched voices. They subsequently recorded a lovely album for Tradition which, unfortunately, is out of print.

4. Willie the Weeper.

I picked this up from a record by Shep Ginandes (whom I never met, and whose name I hope I am not misspelling). I gradually evolved away from the kind of roughhewn guitar style I used for this one, but there was a time when "Willie" was regarded as my signature song, and I couldn't get off the stand without doing it. No matter how good songs like these are, singers begin to think thoughts of scarlet letters, albatrosses, and kind words from Donny Osmond. Some years later, standing in the wings at an Arlo Guthrie concert, I sympathetically watched his eyes roll heavenward as he trudged back to do "Alice's Restaurant" for an encore, at the screaming insistence of his adoring fans. Backstage after the show, I offered to teach him "Willie the Weeper."

5. Twelve Gates to the City

From Gary Davis. The "Rev" was probably my single greatest influence as a guitarist. Although I never studied with him formally, I am still learning from what he taught me. With a couple of notable exceptions, however, I have always made it a point not to cop any of his guitar charts in toto. The arrangement here is in the aforementioned percussive style that I was fond of in those days.

6. River, She Come Down

The only song I ever wrote that ever made me any money, and I hate it. It started out as a guitar exercise, but since I usually taught songs in those days, I needed lyrics. Vaguely remembering a piece that Dick Weissman used to do on the banjo, I carelessly flung together some nonsensical doggerel and used Dick's chorus—"River, river she come down." My students seemed happy enough, and that should have been that, except that Peter, Paul & Mary, who were in the process of getting their act together, took a fancy to it. Renamed "Bamboo," PP&M performed it on their first album, which sold seven trillion copies. Particularly embarrassing was the way some of the pop music critics homed in

on the lyrics. I cringed when they called them "surrealist." One erudite soul (I forget who) compared them with Garcia Lorca. Fortunately, the Muzak version was an instrumental. I shared the royalties (and the chagrin) with Dick.

7. Careless Love

Does anyone know a lyric to this tune that isn't mawkishly sentimental? I still love the melody and the first verse, but, after that, things go pretty much downhill. I keep promising myself to write a few new verses, but I never seem to get around to it. I have no idea where I learned this one. I checked an ancient repertory file that I still keep, which lists sources for my songs. The card for "Careless Love" simply says: "osmosis." So be it.

8. Betty and Dupree

Kenny Goldstein's excellent notes to the first edition of this record inform me that this is a true ballad. Frank Dupree, "a white South Carolinian . . . robbed an Atlanta jewelry store in 1921, and killed a policeman while making his escape. Dupree was later captured in Detroit, was tried and convicted, and was hanged on September 1, 1922." Kenny's notes further inform me that I learned this song from an old friend, Jerry Levine (which I had forgotten). My ears inform me that Jerry probably got it from Brownie McGhee.

9. Bed Bug Blues

As you may have noticed, *nostalgie de la boue* was a big item on my agenda back in '59. This is from Bessie Smith, whose wry and ribald reading of it remains unsurpassed.

10. Leave Her, Johnny

From *Foc'sle Songs and Shanties Sung by Paul Clayton & the Foc'sle Singers* (Folkways 2429). This may seem like a Viennese waltz in the middle of a break dance contest, but to me it fits in just fine. Paul Clayton, my aforementioned guru, was one of the most frequently recorded singers of the time, with upwards of twenty albums to his credit. When the opportunity presented itself to do a sea shanty album with chorus, his first thought, naturally, was to go over to Washington Square and round up the usual suspects. They were Bob Yellin, bluegrass banjoist and alto singer par excellence; Bob Brill, blues singer, guitarist, and kazumpet virtuoso (also called the trumpoo); Rog Abrahams, balladeer and folklorist (but not yet the distinguished Doctor Roger D. Abrahams); and Dave Van Ronk, self-anointed hog-calling champion of upper MacDougal Street.

Rehearsal space was no problem. Art D'Lugoff had just opened his Village Gate, and was having trouble obtaining the necessary license to hire entertainment. Singers were welcome to come in and sit around and warble, or, in our case, bellow, with Art only too happy to supply pitchers of beer or wine to fend off dehydration. The problem with this was that after a few pitchers we were so well fended that our attention was apt to wander a bit. A diligent hour or so of "Haul on the Bowline" and "Santa Anna," and somehow we would find ourselves harmonizing "Friggin' in the Riggins" or "D'Lugoff Fill the Flowing Bowl." Impromptu barbershop quartets would form as other singers arrived, and by the end of the evening, Paul and I would be debating whether to form a "Patrick Henry Brigade" of folksingers and go off to the Sierra Maestra to liberate Cuba, or to take our brigade to the Sierra Catskills, liberate Grossinger's, and turn it into a folk club.

More rehearsals were scheduled, with pretty much the same results. Imagine our surprise when the time came to actually make the record, and we discovered that we only knew eight tunes. We needed twenty. With the help of (appropriately enough) a goodly supply of Demerara rum, and miracle little short of direct divine intervention, we improvised and head-arranged our way through the whole album in one session. The result was one of the best records I have ever had anything to do with.

I can't understand it to this day.

11. Yas, Yas, Yas

I think I learned this from a record by the Spirits of Rhythm, and it was originally called "The Duck's Yas Yas." In any case, various versions of it were kicking around the jazz scene when I was. Some of the raunchier verses were omitted in deference to the tender sensibilities of the folk audience.

12. See That My Grave is Kept Clean

Blind Lemon Jefferson's curiously macabre secular spiritual. A few years later, my friend and colleague Geoff Muldaur went down to Wortham, Texas, and swept Lemon's grave, a weird thing to do, but I wish I had thought of it.

13. Winin' Boy

When Jelly Roll Morton walked into the studio at the Library of Congress on May 21, 1938, it was his firm purpose to set the record straight. Jazz, in the form of Swing, was sweeping the world, and he was one of the founding fathers. After more than a decade of obscure poverty, here was a chance to put himself on the map. Unfortunately, he did no such thing. Morton's old-fashioned piano playing, his carny bombast (at times he sounds remarkably like W.C. Fields), and his preposterous claims ("I invented jazz in 1906") were, for the most part, ignored, and, to the extent that they were not, served mainly to add public

ridicule to his list of musical and personal misfortunes. But Morton was essentially right. In over four solid recorded hours of talking, singing, and piano playing, he amply demonstrated his seminal role in the history of jazz, and created a masterpiece of Americana that is funny, sad, and, ultimately, touching.

This reading of "Winin' Boy" is based on Morton's. I perform it to this day.

14. Just a Closer Walk With Thee

My favorite cut on the whole record, mostly because of Dick Rosmini's guitar playing. His supple 12/8 feeling against my relentless 4/4 engenders a kind of relaxed tension that jazz people call "swing." When you worked with Roz the whole was always more than the sum of its parts. Dick also appears on "Georgie on the I.R.T.," where, along with some lovely picking, he provides the magnificently deranged vocal harmony. Since the "Born Again" dementia, I have been forced to jettison most of the religious songs I used to do. They have the effect of turning you into a magnet for glassy-eyed, fanatical bores.

15. Gambler's Blues

As Jelly Roll Morton said: "This is the first blues I no doubt heard in my life." Although it isn't exactly a blues, and I didn't exactly hear it. I read it. When I was thirteen years old, give or take, and the second hottest ukelele basher in the nabe (Tommy McNiff could cut me anytime), I ran across a copy of a book called *The Fireside Book of Folksongs*. Along with "Abdullah Bulbul Emir" and "Barbara Allen," there was a song called "Saint James Infirmary." Now, I couldn't read music, but I took one look at those lyrics and said, "Hoo Boy, that's for me." I sought out a friend who was studying piano, and in no time at all I had the funkiest ukelele version of "Saint James Infirmary" since Cliff Edwards. (Tiny Tim hadn't been invented yet.) Louis Armstrong and Josh White made some involuntary contributions here, and so did the irrepressible Jimmy Rushing, whose habit of bursting into song at the bar of the old Stuyvesant Casino while he was on a break between sets led to some (to me) memorable duets.

This is not the original 1959 recording, but one I did a year or two later for Ken Goldstein's remarkable compendium album *The Unfortunate Rake: A Study in the Evolution of a Ballad* (Folkways 3805).

16. Spike Driver's Moan

From the 1928 recording of Mississippi John Hurt, re-issued on Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music* (Folkways double albums 2951, 2952, 2953). At that point we all assumed that John was dead. When he emerged a year or so later alive and picking, it was exactly like a dream.

17. Georgie on the I.R.T.

By Lawrence Block, now a distinguished mystery novelist, but

back then just a bum like everybody else. As a satirical songwriter Larry has few equals and no superiors. This is a parody of an old Carter Family favorite, "Engine #143." This was re-issued by Folkways as part of Harry Smith's monumental *Anthology of American Folk Music*, six LPs of traditional American music, recorded in the '20s and '30s by traditional singers (Folkways double albums 2951, 2952, 2953). The scope of this collection was panoramic: Uncle Dave Macon, Mississippi John Hurt, Blind Willie Johnson, Buell Kazee, Lemon Jefferson, the list goes on and on. *The Anthology* was our bible. We all knew every word of every song on it, including the ones we hated. They say that in the 19th century British Parliament, when a member would begin to quote a classical author in Latin the entire House would rise in a body and finish the quote along with him. It was like that.

With "Georgie on the I.R.T.," the parody is sometimes line by line, and by the mid-sixties, when Harry's *Anthology* had been more or less superseded by the beginnings of the present flood of re-issues, fewer and fewer people were getting the whole joke.

For those of you without benefit of a "Classical Education," I herewith append the lyrics of Maybelle Carter's "Engine #143" as best I remember them.

Along come the F.F.V., the swiftest on the line
Running over the C&O road, just twenty minutes behind
Running into Sunville (?), her quarters on the line
Receiving very strict orders from the station just behind.

George's mother came to him with a bucket on her arm
Saying, "My darling son, be careful how you run
Many a man has lost his life, in trying to make lost time
But if you run your engine right, you'll get there just on time."

Up the road he darted, against the rocks he crashed
Upside down the engine turned, and Georgie's breast was smashed
His head lay against the firebox door, the flames were rising high
"I'm glad to be born for an engineer on the C&O road to die."

The doctor said to Georgie, "My darling boy, be still
Your life may yet be saved, if it is God's blessed will."
"Oh no," said George, "that will not do, I want to die so free
I want to die for the engine I love, one hundred and forty-three."

The doctor said to Georgie, "Your life may not be saved.
Murdered upon the railroad, to die in a lonesome grave."

His face was covered up with blood, his eyes you could not see
And the very last words that Georgie said were "Nearer my God to Thee."

(Seeing these lyrics in cold print, you might wonder what attracted me to folk music. A good question.)

18. Come Back Baby

The "Washington Square Circle Jerk" was a Sunday only institution. As I recall, we had six other days in each week back then, and you had to go someplace. One someplace was the "Caricature" on MacDougal Street, a tiny coffeehouse, with an even tinier back room where you could pick and sing as long as you didn't disturb the marathon bridge tournament out front. (Cheeseburgers were also available on the cuff—genesis of my ongoing addiction.) There the clans would forgether to teach, and learn, show off, and maybe do a bit of courting on the side. Dick Rosmini, Barry Kornfeld, Pete Goldsmith, Luke Faust, Bruce Langhorn, Eric Weisberg—God knows who else all. And there was Dave Woods.

Dave was a real musician, a jazz guitarist who had studied with Lennie Tristano, and did some country blues picking for his own amusement. He really knew theory: diminisheds, ninths, augmented chords, thirteenth—he knew how they worked and he was only too happy to show you. It was like having coffee with Einstein a few times a week.

This arrangement is Dave's, only he did it a lot better.

19. Black Mountain Blues

From Bessie Smith, one of my early idols. Bessie's singing was an especially useful model for me in my jazz band days, since, like her, I was singing against a six- or seven-piece group without a mike. In the upholstered armchairs we worked, microphones were about as common as pousse-café or single malt scotch. I gradually evolved away from this approach toward something a bit more intimate, but when I really need to open up, Bessie is still there.

20. My Baby's So Sweet

From the recording by Blind Boy Fuller, whose work I was just getting familiar with.

Folkways and The Folk Music Revival

Moses Asch founded Folkways Records in 1947, but had been recording folk, blues, and jazz musicians since the early 1940s—among them Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, and Mary Lou Williams. Asch wanted to capture the whole world of sound through recordings, and to make available to the public the voices of those who rarely found a hearing on national media.

Folkways Records had a tremendous influence on the folk music revival described in Kip Lornell's notes. Often record companies reflect trends in music, but Folkways both reflected and helped to create them. Asch not only issued recordings of fledgling performers such as Dave Van Ronk, he also reissued anthologies of out-of-print 78 rpm recordings—among them the Harry Smith Collection referred to by both Van Ronk and Lornell. In addition Asch encouraged Mike Seeger, Ralph Rinzler, and many others, to visit rural areas, record the best musicians, and release them to an enthusiastic audience on Folkways. Live concert tours often followed the recordings.

Many performers recorded their first one or two albums for Folkways, before moving on to other record companies that promised better distribution and higher royalties (whether or not they delivered them). Other performers recorded their last albums for Folkways—recordings made when their music was perhaps no longer commercially fashionable but still possessed the musical artistry that made it popular in the first place. An artist's Folkways years were often marked by considerable artistic freedom, and the recordings remained in print far longer than those on other labels.

Folkways provided a service to the public that no other record company has ever offered on such a large scale: Asch kept every recording he issued in print, whether it sold 5 copies or 5000 copies each year. This meant that if someone took a sudden interest in a given style or performer, every Folkways album ever made of it was still available—at least by mail order from the Folkways offices, in Manhattan, if not in record stores catering to contemporary hits. People could discover and rediscover the Harry Smith Collection, or Dave Van Ronk himself.

In all, Asch issued and kept available over 2,000 albums on Folkways during his 40 years as its owner. These recordings document the social, political, and cultural movements of the middle of the Twentieth Century, of which the folk music revival is only a part. The Smithsonian acquired Folkways in 1987 in order to preserve the vast cultural heritage for future generations.

Following Asch's policy, the Smithsonian Institution is keeping every one of the Folkways recordings available. Contact us and we will send you a free catalogue. In addition, we are re-issuing part of the collection on a new label, Smithsonian/Folkways, of which this anthology is a part. Among the projects already completed and available on CD and cassette are a number that had an important influence on the folk music revival itself, or were direct results of it:

- SF 40005 *Jean Ritchie and Doc Watson at Folk City*
- SF 40011 *Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry Sing*
- SF 40012 *The Doc Watson Family*
- SF 40027/28 *Pete Seeger Singalong at Sanders Theatre 1980*
- SF 40035 *Reverend Gary Davis, Pure Religion and Bad Company*
- SF 40037 *American Banjo, Three Finger and Scruggs Style*
- SF 40038 *Mountain Music Bluegrass Style*

The Folkways Years Series:

- SF 40033 *Sonny Terry, The Folkways Years*
- SF 40034 *Brownie McGhee, The Folkways Years*
- SF 40036 *The New Lost City Ramblers, The Early Years (1958-1962)*

For a catalogue write: Folkways Catalogue, Office of Folklife Programs, 955 L'Enfant Plaza Suite 2600, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., or fax 202/287-3699, or telephone 202/287-3262.

In the 1960s I used to browse through bins of "cut-outs"—records with a hole drilled in the label that were sold at steep discounts in a little store on Broadway. Sometimes defective, always lacking the heavy cardboard covers and the liner notes that were the hallmark of Folkways recordings, these drilled discs were a door to unsuspected delights. One of the memorable recordings I purchased was Dave Van Ronk's *Ballads, Blues and a Spiritual*. It had several blisters in the vinyl that sent my phonograph needle skittering across two of the bands. It is an unexpected pleasure to hear them whole. They are still fine performances, revealing the influences on his style, honoring his teachers, and forging his own approaches to the songs. As Van Ronk himself notes in his interview, what is newer and more 'developed' is not necessarily better. Many artists have fond memories of the artistic integrity they were allowed, and the musical strides they took, during their "Folkways years."

Anthony Seeger
Curator, The Folkways Collection
Director, Smithsonian/Folkways
Recordings

Dave Van Ronk's Folkways Years by Kip Lornell

Any mention of the late 1950s rightly conjures visions of American culture at the cusp of a major transition—political, social, and musical. Folk music was once again about to enter the American popular consciousness. It had always been there, of course. From Maine to California, rural America bustled with the real thing. Black blues musicians played in small Alabama juke joints for Saturday night patrons, who came to drink, gamble, and have a really good time. The music of small wind ensembles, such as the Six Fat Dutchman or Whoopie John Whilfart, could be heard performing German-American polka music over small radio stations in south-central Minnesota. Cowboys in Montana gathered for weekend relaxation, often dancing to the sounds of small fiddle-led stringbands. Folk music, and other manifestations of folk culture, can be found throughout the United States, though often below the threshold of the mass media.

The revivals of interest in American folk music have been cyclical. Enterprising charitable foundations such as the one set-up by Russell Sage "for the improvement of social and living conditions in the U.S.A." funded studies of folk music and crafts in the Southern Upland during the teens and '20s. This impulse resulted in the establishment of the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, North Carolina, and other similar schools in the South.

Folk music also captured the imagination of a larger, more urban segment of the United States. Political ideology, cultural nationalism, and a disaffection with the popular music industry all influenced a renewed interest in American regional, or vernacular, art forms. John and Alan Lomax recorded rural musicians for the Library of Congress. Pete Seeger dropped out of Harvard to pursue his interest in folk music. Lead Belly became a great model for many of these urban, educated "citybills" who came to admire, love, and perform all types of American folk music. Though by no means household names, Woody Guthrie, Cisco Houston, and Burl Ives became recognized folk performers by the beginning of the Cold War. The Weavers brought arrangements of folk music to the hit parade in the early 1950s.

Dave Van Ronk, too, was attracted to American vernacular music, but he was first attracted to jazz. In an interview with me, Dave recalled the period. [In the quotations from the January 21, 1991, interview below, I have made a few stylistic changes to make it read more easily. The full interview is part of *The Folkways Collection* at the Smithsonian Institution.]

"What molded me musically were the 'moldy-fig' wars of the late 1940s. The traditionalists—who I call the [musicians]—felt there was an original [platonist] form that was pure. They felt the original form had degenerated, so here we have Preservation Hall [New Orleans' famous jazz club] as Plato's Cave. The modernists were aesthetic Darwinists and I think they were every bit as stupid. What is newer and more 'developed' is not necessarily better. You can't apply either yardstick to aesthetics."

"Being an adolescent at the time, I was an absolutist and I had to jump one way or the other. As soon as I was aware that this titanic tempest-in-a-teapot was going down... I stopped listening to my Dizzy Gillespie records for about seven years. I got over it. I'm happy that I have a huge collection of Gillespie and Parker."

For about five or six years, Van Ronk stuck with traditional jazz. A high school drop-out, Van Ronk was determined to make his living through musical performance. So he moved to Manhattan and promptly lost forty pounds that first year away from home. He not only played guitar, but usually took over the vocal chores because he didn't mind and could sing loudly enough to be heard without a microphone. However, by the middle 1950s the revival of interest in traditional jazz had dissipated. The traditional music scene degenerated to the point that he'd often "play for Union scale and have to slip them back something under the table. You were lucky to get two gigs in a week, more often you'd get one gig in two weeks."

Although Van Ronk loved the music, his future as a performer of traditional jazz seemed bleak. He, along with other shellac mavens interested in old 78 rpm records from the 1920s and 1930s, used to haunt the Jazz Record Center on 47th Street, where the blues and jazz records were often mixed together. This is where Van Ronk got a taste for blues singers such as King Solomon Hill, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and Furry Lewis. He gradually gained a greater taste and appreciation for folk music, especially blues, and decided to make a switch from jazz to folk. After all, he already had both the basic guitar technique and a powerful, gruff voice.

Van Ronk views this move as "technically retrogressive and partly lateral." It was also a sound, and not surprising, aesthetic decision based on his on-going interest in the grassroots of Twentieth Century American music. Just as the Soviets were becoming the first to get into the Space Age by putting up Sputnik, Dave Van Ronk was making the more earthy transition to folk music. It was not that difficult because he moved into a compatible circle of "neo-ethnics."

In New York City, musicians interested in folk music tended to congregate in Washington Square. This gathering point, not far from New York University at the edge of Greenwich Village, became the weekly meeting and training grounds for folk music. People came to swap songs, look over banjos and guitars, talk about up-coming gigs, and see their friends. Barry Kornfeld, a thoughtful veteran of the scene, described it in a 1959 issue of *Caravan* (No. 18, August/September) magazine:

"At 2 PM every Sunday, from the first balmy days of April to the last of the fair October weather, large numbers of instrumentalists and singers gather, from whose ranks there will emerge some fine professionals and some equally fine, or at least equally intense, amateurs who will follow in the footsteps of their predecessors. [We] presupposed the existence of Washington Square gatherings as we had presupposed the existence of grass, trees, and, of course, park departments."

The Washington Square scene really began in the middle 1940s, about the time

that World War II drew to a close. Musicians such as George Margolin, rarely recalled today, would play his guitar in the afternoons. More famous "folkies" also made their way to Washington Square during the immediate post-war years. Fiddler Alan Block, Tom Paley (later one of the founding members of the New Lost City Ramblers), Harry Belafonte, progressive banjo wizard Roger Sprung, and Pete Seeger could be heard there on a good day. This assembly point was a true institution by the time that Dave Van Ronk himself became a regular there in the middle 1950s.

These Washington Square hootenannies were rather informal affairs, mostly for fun. Van Ronk often performed by himself but for a while he teamed with Roy Berkeley and they played as the "Traveling Trotskyite Troubadours." It was also a multi-ethnic group eager for new musical experiences. Many of them listened to Harry Smith's extremely influential *Anthology of American Folk Music*, which Moses Asch released on Folkways in the early 1950s (the Folkways double albums 2951, 2952, and 2953 are still available on cassette from the Smithsonian Institution). The *Anthology* included a sampling of cajun, blues, old-time, and sacred music on 78 rpm records originally issued between 1920 and 1943.

But live music and musical interaction were the key to the attraction of Washington Square:

"The people that I was hanging around with were into all kinds of stuff; everything from bluegrass to African cabaret music. All across the boards. I was a sponge. [I] picked up everything that I heard. Everything was going into the same meat-grinder. All of us were sort of like that. People [who] specialized in old-time music would all of a sudden launch into a country blues. It was much more eclectic."

The performances became more serious, too, as people decided to try to make a living from playing folk music. A group of them formed the Folk Singers Guild. Though not an all-encompassing organization, the Folk Singers Guild nonetheless affected the New York City folk scene. The hundred or so members were mostly, but not all, musicians. Washington Square served as the primary venue for most Guild members, however, it also organized a few small concerts in local halls. Van Ronk recalls "We used to go over to the Sullivan Street Playhouse, in the days before the 'Fantasticks' moved in. It was on Sunday nights when they were 'dark.' We would have three, four or five people doing maybe twenty minutes or a half hour. That was really the only playing experience that most of us got. There wasn't anything else; there were no clubs. . . even Gerdes [Folk City] didn't start until about '61."

Paul Clayton, one of the most active New York folksingers in the late 1950s, refused to join the Folk Singers Guild. He used to attend meetings but would never join because he was a professional who made his living singing and recording. By 1960 Clayton had made at least a dozen albums and had served as Van Ronk's principal mentor. Clayton was also an ardent collector of songs from older musicians, and he directly or discreetly taught Dave Van Ronk many songs, such as "Duncan and Brady," which is included here.

Rev. Gary Davis became another of Van Ronk's heroes and he learned much from the older man's highly rhythmic finger picking style. Van Ronk views Davis as a peer, albeit "older, more experienced, . . . and more talented." They worked many of the same clubs and Van Ronk became most intimately acquainted with Rev. Davis shortly after these recordings were made. In 1961 Van Ronk was booking acts for one of the coffeehouses on McDougal and remembers "I had Gary there every possible time I could. Unless it was an absolute full house, I would be sitting in front of the stage watching those fingers. That's the only way you can really learn. I'd ask him, 'How do you do this?' He'd be only too happy to show me [and] then he'd cackle when I got it wrong, which was usually. It was that kind of thing that Gary and I had in common."

McDougal Street was home to Van Ronk at the time of his Folkways recordings. Izzy Young's Folklore Center, which served as the informal headquarters for New York City's folksingers, was just a few doors down from Van Ronk's apartment. This long, narrow store was crammed full of books, records, and posters announcing folk and jazz events. A friendly, rambling establishment, the Folklore Center became the crossroads and switchboard for local folksingers as well as visitors. "If somebody came into town and wanted to find someone or wanted it to be known that they were there they went to the Center and Izzy would broadcast it, whether you wanted him to or not!"

Some folksingers, including Van Ronk, virtually lived at the Folklore Center. Folk singers, instrument makers, entrepreneurs, and budding folklorists could be found there. Academic programs in folklore were new and several Washington Square/Folklore Center regulars, including Young himself, who earned a Ph.D. in ethnomusicology, eventually went that route. In the late 1950s Roger Abrahams, Ellen Steckert, and Kenny Goldstein hung out there. Drs. Abrahams and Steckert went on to record for Folkways and Goldstein eventually produced scores of folk music records for a variety of labels.

Goldstein, in fact, recorded and noted Van Ronk's Folkways recordings. Intent on getting a recording out to the public in order to promote his folk singing career, Van Ronk pestered everyone he could think of in the business. Dave eventually got both Elektra and Lyricord interested in recording him, but in 1959 he convinced Moses Asch, founder of Folkways, that he was ready to record a full album. And Kenny Goldstein served as the "Artist & Repertory" person and the basic link between Van Ronk and Asch:

"Kenny was the whole *schmetti*. Kenny came to pick me up; he drove me out to Long Island, where he was living at the time. He had a little studio in his basement. I think I did it in one session, certainly no more than two. I'll say this for him, [Kenny] got a better quality recording in his basement than Moe did in the more formal studio set-up. . . He let me call the shots pretty much. I'd worked out the arrangements and these things were pretty much standards in my repertoire. They were worked out carefully; I'd been honing them for some time."

The selections Van Ronk was recording for Folkways drew largely from African American music. They reflected a clear, long-standing interest in his heroes—among them Reverend Gary Davis, Bessie Smith, Jelly Roll Morton, Jimmy Yancey, and Louis Armstrong. Van Ronk always admired keyboard players and approached the guitar pianistically, which is one reason why he never played with a slide or bottleneck.

Within a few years of making these recordings, Van Ronk's repertoire and approach to music had radically changed. He still loved the early recordings by Scrapper Blackwell, Blind Boy Fuller, Snooks Eaglin, but "I was developing an approach and a style that was really quite different from that of my models. A few years down the line, I simply had no interest at all in [merely] emulating my models." Nonetheless the Folkways recordings on this anthology accurately represent the music produced by Dave Van Ronk during the halcyon days of the folk music boom.

In retrospect, with three decades more of experience, Van Ronk says he would have paid more attention to both microphone placement and the balance between the voice and guitar. "I would have insisted on a second or a third take on some of the more egregious mistakes, which, by and large, are no worse than the mistakes I make now. . . But [today] either the producer stops it or I do."

Like many Folkways artists, Van Ronk has strong feelings about Folkways Records founder and prime mover, Moses Asch. His recollections are marked by humor and punctuated by gruff laughter. I asked Dave about his Folkways contract and he remembered "It would have been just like me to insist on a contract, but I don't remember that I did. If I did, I'd love to see that contract. That would have been one hell of a weird document!"

Artist royalties are often a sore point between record companies and artists. A follow-up question about his Folkways royalties was met with amusement and this story:

"One time around 1964, I got a check for \$3.98 or something like that [for royalties]. I flew off the handle and I thought 'Goddammit, if this guy's going to steal, that's one thing. But to steal and insult my intelligence! Here, I draw the line.' I did a lot of business with Bill Krazalowski, the music lawyer. I happened to be in his office; Bill said 'Let's shake the tree a little bit.' He wrote off this really nasty, threatening letter on his legal stationary—chucking all the time. About three or four weeks later, I got this check for \$700. I couldn't believe my eyes!"

"No more than two days later, it was very cold. I went down to the Village Gate. I was sitting at the bar and I didn't notice that the large fellow with the camel-hair coat, sitting adjacent to me, was Moe Asch. I thought 'Oh, shit, now he's really going to take my head off!' He smiled and said to me 'I got your letter Dave.' He slapped me on the back and said 'You're finally getting smart.'"

That was Moses Asch and the scene was New York City. The times changed and so did Dave Van Ronk. Inevitably the 1950s folk music boom ended. The Beatles, the Supremes, James Brown, and the Beach Boys altered our tastes in popular music.

Dave went on to form a small band, the Hudson Valley Dusters, and to record for Verve/Forecast, Philo, Cadet, and other companies. He toured the United States, working in clubs from Carnegie Hall to small coffeehouses on the North Beach of San Francisco. Greenwich Village remains his home and Dave continues making his livelihood from music. His co-op apartment today is pretty close to the old haunts—Washington Square and the old Folklore Center. But those places are in the past, closer to the middle of the twentieth century.

Dave Van Ronk's music from this period survives, however, revealing his fine musicianship, demonstrating his admiration for his predecessors and mentors, and hinting at some of the directions he would take after the Folkways years ended and his career took new turns.

Discography

Inside Dave Van Ronk (Fantasy CD 24714, a reissue of Dave Van Ronk, *Folksinger* [Prestige/International 3056] and *Inside Dave Van Ronk* [Prestige/International 14025]); *Your Basic Dave Van Ronk* (Kicking Mule - US, Sonet - Europe, Aural Experience - Canada); *Dave Van Ronk, The Folkways Years 1959-1961*, a reissue of selected songs from Folkways 2383, 3818, and 31020 (Smithsonian/Folkways SF40041); *Going Back to Brooklyn* (Reckless Records); *Somebody Else, Not Me* (Philo); *Sunday Street* (Philo); *Songs for Aging Children* (Chess/Cadet 50044); *Dave Van Ronk* (Fantasy); *In The Tradition* (Prestige 7800); *Dave Van Ronk's Ragtime Jug Stompers* (Mercury); *Dave Van Ronk, Folksinger* (Prestige); *Dave Van Ronk's Jug Stompers* (Mercury 20864); *Dave Van Ronk and the Hudson Dusters* (Verve/Forecast FT 3041); *Just Dave Van Ronk* (Mercury); *No Dirty Names* (Verve); *Hummin' To Myself* (Gazell); *Dave Van Ronk in Rome* (Folk Studio - Italy); *Hesitation Blues* (Big Beat - United Kingdom); *Van Ronk* (Polydor); *Songs of Berthold Brecht* (with Frankie Armstrong) (Aural Tradition - Canada).

For children: *Dave Van Ronk Presents Peter and the Wolf* (Alacazam 1004); *American Children* (Alacazam 1002).

Credits

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