



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, 750 9th Street NW, Suite 4100
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IF I HAD MY WAY:

EARLY HOME RECORDINGS

REVEREND GARY DAVIS



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IF I HAD MY WAY: EARLY HOME RECORDINGS OF REVEREND GARY DAVIS

MADE BY JOHN COHEN IN 1953

When young John Cohen went to the home of Reverend Gary Davis in early 1953, Cohen could not have known the importance of the recordings he made. These historic recordings of the Reverend predate his seminal albums and feature Davis singing with his wife and another preacher, a rarity among Davis recordings. The 18 tracks provide a window into the world of this blind preacher caught between the blues and the church. Fans of Davis's work will find these recordings to be a revelation, as a full ten songs were never recorded again and cannot be heard elsewhere.

1. IF I HAD MY WAY 4:43 2. IF THE LORD BE FOR YOU 3:43 3. TWELVE GATES TO THE CITY 3:53 4. YOU GOT TO MOVE 4:14 5. WE ARE THE HEAVENLY FATHER'S CHILDREN 3:23 6. A FRIEND LIKE LONELY JESUS 4:22 7. GET RIGHT CHURCH 2:23 8. MARINE BAND 2:47 9. SHINE ON ME 2:58 10. THERE'S DESTRUCTION ON THIS LAND 5:20 11. HE STOLE AWAY 2:38 12. THE UNCLOUDY DAY 4:09 13. SAY NO TO THE DEVIL 3:16 14. I BELONG TO THE BAND 3:56 15. GIVE ME A HEART TO LOVE 2:20 16. HE NEVER HAS LEFT ME ALONE 2:52 17. GOT ON MY TRAVELING SHOES 3:03 18. CIVIL WAR PARADE 5:26



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IF I HAD MY WAY: EARLY HOME RECORDINGS OF REVEREND GARY DAVIS

MADE BY JOHN COHEN IN 1953

1. IF I HAD MY WAY 4:43 (GARY DAVIS/CHANDOS MUSIC, BMI)
2. IF THE LORD BE FOR YOU** 3:43 (ARR. GARY DAVIS/CHANDOS MUSIC, BMI)
3. TWELVE GATES TO THE CITY 3:53 (ARR. GARY DAVIS/CHANDOS MUSIC, BMI)
4. YOU GOT TO MOVE 4:14 (GARY DAVIS/CHANDOS MUSIC, BMI)
5. WE ARE THE HEAVENLY FATHER'S CHILDREN 3:23 (PHYLLIS HALL/ ROBERTA MARTIN STUDIO OF MUSIC)
6. A FRIEND LIKE LONELY JESUS** 4:22 (JOHNSON OATMAN JR.-GEORGE C. HUGG)
7. GET RIGHT CHURCH 2:23 (GARY DAVIS/CHANDOS MUSIC, BMI)
8. MARINE BAND (OH DEAR WHAT CAN THE MATTER BE)** 2:47 (ARR. GARY DAVIS/ CHANDOS MUSIC, BMI)
9. SHINE ON ME** 2:58
10. THERE'S DESTRUCTION ON THIS LAND 5:20 (GARY DAVIS/CHANDOS MUSIC, BMI)
11. HE STOLE AWAY** 2:38 (ARR. GARY DAVIS/CHANDOS MUSIC, BMI)
12. THE UNCLOUDED DAY** 4:09 (J.K. ALWOOD)
13. SAY NO TO THE DEVIL** 3:16 (GARY DAVIS/CHANDOS MUSIC, BMI)
14. I BELONG TO THE BAND 3:56 (GARY DAVIS/CHANDOS MUSIC, BMI)
15. GIVE ME A HEART TO LOVE** 2:20 (GARY DAVIS/CHANDOS MUSIC, BMI)
16. HE NEVER HAS LEFT ME ALONE** 2:52 (L.D. HUGGSTUTLER-JOHNSON OATMAN JR./ BRIDGE BUILDING MUSIC INC., BMI)
17. GOT ON MY TRAVELING SHOES** 3:03
18. CIVIL WAR PARADE 5:26

(** PREVIOUSLY UNRELEASED RECORDINGS)

REVEREND GARY DAVIS: EARLY HOME RECORDINGS, 1953

JOHN COHEN

Anthropologists like to study the initial meeting of two cultures—they call it *first contact*. This CD presents some of the first recordings made of Reverend Gary Davis at the start of his long career with the audiences of the Folk Revival and his eventual star-status in the Blues Revival. These early recordings reflect his dedication and life in gospel music. He had performed religious music in the South and had been ordained a minister shortly before coming to New York City. Between 1950 and 1955, he begged, preached, and sang in the streets of Harlem, alone or with Kinny Peebles. Until the time of these recordings, Rev. Davis lived his life and played his music within the African-American community. After his discovery by the urban white audience he revealed more of his blues, ragtime, and bawdy repertoire in recordings and concert performances.

Blind, Rev. Gary Davis moved to New York City around 1944, coming from a life as a street singer and preacher in North Carolina. He had made a number of 78 rpm recordings of gospel music in 1935 on the ARC label (recorded in New York City), and was well known as a guitar picker down South. His style was admired by other recording artists including Blind Boy Fuller. Davis's birthplace, Greenville, South Carolina, was also the home of Josh White. North Carolina welfare documents confirm that Davis made his living playing music on the streets (see Tilling 1992 for chronology, discography, reviews, photographs, and recollections about Rev. Davis).

Before leaving the South, Rev. Davis married Annie Belle Wright, a deeply religious woman who never strayed from the church. For all her life with Davis, Mother Davis stuck by the church music, and would depart the room when blues or ragtime was played.

Arriving in New York, Davis made contact with other Southern musicians who had migrated earlier. Among these was Brownie McGhee, a blues singer and guitar picker who had known

Davis in North Carolina. Brownie McGhee was in contact with the early folk music scene which had emerged in the city after World War II. He often appeared at folk music clubs and events with the harmonica player "Blind" Sonny Terry. McGhee had a school of music on 125th Street, and Rev. Davis gave guitar lessons there. It was probably through McGhee that Davis was invited to appear at the Lead Belly Memorial concert at Town Hall in the spring of 1950, where artists known to the folk music world performed, including Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Alan Lomax, Brownie and Sonny, and Oscar Brand. Lead Belly's 12-string guitar hung on the stage wall throughout the show. At the start of the second half of the concert Rev. Davis emerged into the spotlight unannounced from behind the closed curtain. He played "You Got to Move" and a guitar instrumental "Marine Band," then went back behind the curtain and didn't appear again.

I was there and was amazed by his stunning performance. I had never witnessed or even imagined such a guitar virtuoso before, and Davis played nimbly, evoking the human voice as well as a marching band on his guitar. Nothing was said about him in the program notes or in the spoken announcements that night.

Later I visited the office of People's Songs (the predecessor of *Sing Out!* magazine), and they asked if someone would volunteer to go to the Bronx to pick up a blind guitar player and bring him to perform at a hootenanny downtown. I jumped at the opportunity when I heard his name was Blind Gary Davis. On the taxi ride downtown, we stopped to pick up Blind Sonny Terry, and I was very impressed to become the guide for those two.

After that I started to visit Rev. Davis at his home in Harlem, and possibly was the first young white guitar player to hang out with him at his place (I was just beginning to learn the guitar, and probably never played for Davis). Besides welcoming me, he treated me very carefully and initially did familiar tunes such as "Way Down Upon the Swanee River" before moving into his deep gospel music. In all my visits he never played the blues or ragtime tunes. He was primarily a religious gospel singer, and many of his "arrangements" reflected the music heard in Harlem gospel churches.



In 1952, I made recordings of Rev. Davis (now lost) on a cumbersome wire recorder. By December of 1953, I purchased one of the first portable tape recorders in order to document his music more permanently on tape. It was a challenge to lug it up to Davis's place in the Bronx by bus and subway. These recordings were some of the earliest made of him, predating the issuance of his first Stinson and Riverside records.

From these tapes, one can get a picture of Rev. Davis's music before he started to interface with the New York folk music scene. A short time later a parade of young men started to lead him to concerts and picked up his approach to music. They included John Gibbon, Stefan Grossman, Roy Bookbinder, Barry Kornfeld, Gino Foreman, and Fred Gerlach. Legend has it that Jorma Katonen was among this group as well. They all learned from him. It was like the earlier tradition of musicians whose apprenticeship had begun by leading Blind Lemon Jefferson around small cities and towns—only in this case, the musicians would accompany Davis to concerts, traveling by train and airplane. I believe Davis sharpened up his playing in response to these young men's growing ability on the guitar. His guitar picking became cleaner and more precise on account of his interaction with them. They encouraged him greatly. Once he had made recordings, his repertoire spread rapidly to others. His songs were sung and recorded by Dave Van Ronk, Eric von Schmidt, Peter, Paul & Mary, and Bob Dylan.

In 1955 I came upon a single 78 rpm record (Lenox- with an orange label) of Davis's at a music store in the Oak Street area of New Haven, Conn. Later, Davis gave me the printed sheet music for his song "There's Destruction in This Land." Before his discovery as a folk musician in New York, he was attempting to use the music trade to make some money—within gospel music. In the years that followed he made a better living playing at concerts, clubs, and folk festivals.

Interested in how he spent his days, I photographed him playing his music at the corner grocery store, and begging with a tin cup and guitar in the streets of New York. Sometimes I would find him at the Eddie Bell Music Store in midtown Manhattan. He told of how he'd fallen asleep in the street and was robbed of his guitar, "Miss Gibson." There were other extraordinary musicians begging in midtown at that time, including Moondog—a forerunner of the avant-garde jazz music of the 1960s. I recently learned that the first recording of Davis in New York City (after his move north) was done by Tony Schwartz as part of his project documenting the sounds heard on the New York streets the late 1940s (issued on Asch Record AA3).



In the small front room of Rev. Davis's home, his big guitar took up much of the space. There was no more room on the couch, and I would sit directly in front of him, receiving the full impact of his singing and playing. Ellen Steckert had interviewed him in 1951 (according to Robert Tilling's book), and she described this front room as "a crowded living room with a table that took up so much space in the center that the children who emerged from the kitchen and who wished to leave by the front door had to crawl under the table in order to gain their exit."

When he performed, Rev. Davis's left hand gripped the neck of the guitar with his thumb reaching over the neck fretting bass notes. He got all his complicated sound using his thumb and one finger to pick out melody and bass, and he used thumb and finger picks to bring out this sound, which had been developed to be heard in the streets. His left hand was always in motion up and down the neck. He rarely lingered long in one place on the fingerboard, and didn't use many open (first-position) chords. He seemed to have a different position for each note in the melody. He had a repertory of bass runs, some of which resembled piano bass lines animating the structure of each song. Observing his musical approach was intriguing, but really it made little sense to analyze this music. It was better to feel the total impact, for there you could get at his full musical conception, and it was overwhelming.

I never questioned his hospitality, and he never questioned my purpose. In retrospect he was extremely generous and willing to share his music. I was very naive and unaware of the gift I was receiving. Once in a while, when Mrs. Davis wasn't in the room, Rev. Davis would tell sexy stories that could be considered off-color—done with musical accompaniment. I now believe that he was testing me, and I didn't understand this, or the way of life he was talking about. At some point I spoke with Alan Lomax about Davis's stories, and Lomax used this opportunity to hold forth on how religious men in the South lived sinful and holy lives simultaneously. Lomax also told me that he had already done complete interviews with Davis, and was planning to publish a book on them. This effectively stopped me from pursuing such a project. Unfortunately, there is no record of any such project in the Lomax archives.

On my third trip to Davis's home (he had moved to the Bronx by then) an unexpected visitor dropped by and joined Davis on several songs. They were comfortable with each other, the visitor being most respectful of Davis. I heard his name as Kinny Peoples. They gave the impression that they had played together many times before. He also played guitar, and I

recorded a smooth, incomplete rendition of him picking "Railroad Bill." I never heard any more about him, except that he later had appeared at a folk song concert at City College. In 2002 while researching for this record I learned the rest: his name was McKinley (Kinny) Peebles (a.k.a. Sweet Papa Stovepipe), and had hung out with Rev. Davis for about five years, 1950–1955. They sometimes preached and sang together on Harlem street corners, often with an American flag on a flagpole, performing spirituals and religious material. Peebles was a year younger than Davis, and had come to New York from the South (he had lived on the Atlantic coast near the Virginia-North Carolina border). The *Encyclopedia of the Blues* says, "He knew some Christian songs that he said came from Blind Reverend Davis, which Davis had never recorded.... As Reverend McKinley Peebles, guitar evangelist in the mold of Reverend Gary Davis, he was a frequent sight Sundays on the streets and in the parks.... He appeared at the Gary Davis Memorial at the Studio Museum in Harlem."

My recorded session with Davis and Peebles may be the only available recording of this remarkable singer, and also a unique recording of Davis singing with another person. In later years, Peebles as "Sweet Papa Stovepipe" entered the folk and blues circuit and was written about by Robert Palmer in the *New York Times* at a time when each new blues "discovery" was reported. Anton Mikofsky—who kindly provided me with this information about Peebles—had gotten bookings at clubs and a few concerts as his manager. He wrote the single entry about him in the *Encyclopedia of the Blues*.

The experience of sitting directly in front of Rev. Davis at his home as he played and sang for hours was often overwhelming to me, and I welcomed the relief when his wife suggested I go out and buy some sodas for us to drink. Once some friends of mine brought Rev. Davis out to a music party in Great Neck, Long Island. He was impressive and accommodating, and we were admiring. I look back on this and wonder about our assumption that we could take him from Harlem to the suburbs for our learning and entertainment without giving much in return. Another time, Davis and his wife invited me to bring my parents to a church in Harlem where he was being honored, and I remember how upset my mother got when women around the room shouted and went into ecstatic fits during the music. As his personal influence spread within folk music circles, he took on another role as spiritual guide for the folk singers. When Gino Foreman and Marci Stehr were married, the wedding was at Davis's home, and Rev. Davis served as the minister.

Davis had honed his music in the streets and in the churches, and he had developed engaging ways of grabbing his listeners' attention. I used to think that his performance was shaped by this need to hold your interest. It shone out at the Lead Belly Memorial Concert, where with two songs he captivated the audience. However, there is another way to look at this quality: Rev. Davis had an incredible capacity for mimicry, heard in his ability to make the guitar imitate the human voice (as in "You Got to Move"), or the musical textures of a marching band. On some of the gospel numbers, he evokes the call-and-response of a singing congregation along with the rhythmic, swaying motion of the women's chorus. In effect he created a musical photograph through sound, calling up particular atmospheres that were evocative and compelling in their accuracy.

Present at a party of folk musicians years later in Davis's fabled career were Jean Ritchie, Robin Roberts, and John Gibbon (Davis's first guitar student, who also served as his lead-boy). Each person took a turn performing. When it came to Rev. Davis's turn, he announced, "I'm like a mockingbird, I can imitate each person's way of playing," but after that, "I still have my own song."

After he became a well-known performer on the folk song circuit, life changed for him. A wonderful man named Manny Greenhill recognized his genius and musical richness, and set about getting concerts and recordings for him. Rev. Davis was booked at festivals and concerts nationwide, he made tours of England, and was promoted by Greenhill along with Joan Baez, Flatt & Scruggs, Doc Watson, and the New Lost City Ramblers. When Peter, Paul & Mary recorded Davis's song "If I Had My Way," he was able to purchase a house in Queens from the royalties. Davis's influence was felt widely; many young guitar players took lessons from him at his home, and they spread his musical gospel further. Woody Man and Albert Evans were some of the last students welcomed at the Davis home before Davis's death in 1972. Both of them recorded hours of unreleased lessons and stories on tape. During his late years one student or another would travel with Davis, which facilitated things greatly for him.

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ALTHOUGH MY FIRST IMPRESSION OF REVEREND DAVIS WAS OF HIS WONDERFUL GUITAR PICKING, THAT SERVED AS A GATEWAY TO THE FULLER EXPERIENCE OF A MAN WHOSE RELIGIOUS TEXTS WERE A MOVING—IF CAMOUFLAGED—DESCRIPTION OF WHAT IT IS LIKE TO EXIST AS AN AFRICAN AMERICAN IN A WHITE AND SOMETIMES RACIST ENVIRONMENT. PHRASES TOOK ON MEANINGS THAT DESCRIBED BELIEF IN TERMS OF OPPRESSION:

"KEEP TOILING EVEN THOUGH YOUR TEARDROPS FALL.  
SOMETIMES YOU ASK YOURSELF THE QUESTION, 'LORD, WHAT SHALL I DO?' YOUR FRIENDS HAVE THE SAME TROUBLES YOU DO. GOD KNOWS HOW MUCH WE CAN BEAR.  
BECAUSE HE KNOWS—YES, MY GOD, HE KNOWS, JUST HOW MUCH YOU CAN BEAR."

"HE SAID HE WOULD BE YOUR FATHER, YOUR MOTHER, YOUR DOCTOR, IN TIME OF SICKNESS; HE WOULD BE YOUR LAWYER IN THE TIME OF TROUBLE."

"SAY NO TO THE DEVIL, PAY NO MIND TO THE DEVIL, HE'S A DECEIVER, HE'LL MAKE YOU STEAL AND GAMBLE, HE'LL MAKE YOU KILL SOMEBODY, SAY NO."

"GOD IS CALLING FOR THE RICH JUST AS WELL AS FOR THE POOR.  
THERE'S DESTRUCTION IN THIS LAND, HALLELUJAH."

"IF I HAD MY WAY, I WOULD TEAR THIS BUILDING DOWN."

ROBERT TILLING QUOTES FROM A CONCERT IN 1964 WHERE DAVIS TOLD THE AUDIENCE, "I'M HERE IN YOUR MIDST AS A BLACK MAN, LIKE A FLY IN BUTTERMILK. IT AIN'T HOW A THING LOOKS, THOUGH. IT'S WHAT IT IS."

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Mother Davis affected all those who were welcomed to the Davis house with her warmth and religious conviction, and Gary's influence was felt too, far beyond its entertainment value. His worldliness as articulated in blues and ragtime created a communication which entered into the expression of city kids searching for new meaning during the 1960s. Finally, the depth and raw beauty of his singing emerged as the most powerful feature. To me, his voice is incredibly expressive in the way Ray Charles's soul voice is.

Rev. Davis shared his riches with the white world, yet his travels were not always easy, and he had to be prepared and on guard. Once we had to wake him from his hotel room after a festival, and since he didn't answer the phone, we entered his room to shake him gently from sleep. In a flash he took a sharp dagger from under his pillow, ready to defend himself.

Later on that trip home, the plane which carried us made a stop in Washington, D.C., in a heavy snow, and we all waited in a long silence on the tarmac until the crowded plane could find its gate. When the silence became overwhelming, Rev. Davis reached into his pocket, drew out a mouth harp, and started to play the most moving and appropriate blues for the moment. It gave a human presence to the silence and disarmed the tension of waiting. After a moment of haunting harmonica, the stewardess made him stop, saying he was disturbing the passengers. Then she turned on the Muzak.

At one of his first college appearances where he traveled by plane in the early 1960s, he arrived at Antioch College, and with a large, eager audience in the auditorium before him, he proceeded to fall asleep in his chair. They all stayed there in silence, digging this scene in appreciation for forty minutes.

Although I knew him for more than twenty years, he always spoke to me as I was when we first met: as a very young and unworldly, naive person, whom he treated with the respect an elder might have for a kid: "Boy, go out and get me a bottle of soda, will ya?"

ABOUT THESE RECORDINGS

They were made in 1953 on a 1/4-inch tape, reel-to-reel Pentron recorder, with the microphone that came with the machine. The microphone was hand held and shifted direction in response to the music. Sometimes the focus was clearly on the guitar picking, with voice secondary (a mistake, in retrospect). The microphone direction was adjusted when Mrs. Davis or Kinny Peebles joined in the singing, but its distance from the subject was limited by my proximity to the recording machine and its controls. The recording level was indicated by a glowing green tube whose planes of light overlapped when the sound got too strong or distorted. For years I considered these recordings to be of questionable quality, but after the advent of rock 'n' roll recordings, they began to sound good. In fact, they sound better when played loud. The first session, done with a wire recorder, is lost. The surviving session makes up this CD.

When I made the recordings—basically for myself, because I was so intrigued by Rev. Davis's guitar playing—there was no significant audience for this music, nor was there any talk of publication or issuing it on phonograph records. As Rev. Davis became famous during the 1960s, many excellent commercial recordings of his ragtime and blues music were made for the Folk Revival. Gospel music didn't sell to the folk music audience then. His first LP was issued on the Stinson label (recorded with Sonny Terry in April 1954, and on a Riverside LP in January 1956). Only in 2001, when I was working on the recording *Music for Photographs*, did I realize that my sessions at his place in the Bronx predated the commercial recordings and preserved a view of Davis's music at home, under the predominant religious outlook and watchful eye of his wife.

But more of half of the material I recorded was not written by Davis, and now, almost fifty years after these recordings were done, the question arises: who *owns* this music? There is a music industry set up to claim publishing rights, performance rights, and copyrights on this material, even though it played no role in creating the music. Songs such as "Got On My Traveling Shoes," "The

Uncloudy Day," "Shine On Me," and "You Got to Move" were gospel standards, and "Get Right Church" circulated traditionally as "I'm Going Home on the Midnight Train." The Folk Revival's take on seemingly traditional "folk songs" was that this material had arisen from the people and had been passed on in oral tradition. Therefore it followed that the music belonged to the people. However, as music publishers began to copyright this material, the only defense was to make claims of prior ownership, and to copyright the old songs to protect them from predators (predators). Old spirituals and gospel songs got thrown into this mix.

Clearly all these songs were arranged by Davis, and he performed them in his own unique style. "Marine Band" and "Marching Band" guitar inventions are an expression of Davis's genius and creativity. Rev. Davis didn't talk about songwriting or publishing, for his mission was to get the religious word out. Songs made famous by and always associated with him such as "Twelve Gates to the City" and "If I Had My Way" are controlled by Manny Greenhill's descendants, and song royalties are collected and distributed by them. In a wonderful way, Davis had his own explanation about authorship, ownership, and divine intervention. Robert Tilling provides this anecdote: Peter, Paul & Mary called Davis in to the publishers to put his signature on the copyright for "If I Had My Way." Davis was asked, "Did you write this song?" And everybody present was shaken when Davis declared, "No, I didn't write it."... Then he paused and added, "It came to me."

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Even though the public domain origin of many of these compositions logically defines them as public property, under current law uncontrolled compositions such as these are vulnerable to spurious claims of authorship. When Davis and Mrs. Davis passed away, they left no heirs, but an arrangement was made whereby the proceeds from his music would go to Lead Belly's niece. Manny Greenhill's son and grandson continue to oversee the commercial use of Rev. Davis's music. From an ethical point of view, however, it is only fitting that the publishing income should be directed to the public good—in this case, plowed back into a search for further understanding of Rev. Davis's artistry. Previously unissued songs of Rev. Davis might be published by a not-for-profit organization or foundation, with the purpose of generating funds to underwrite research into other Gary Davis material that sits in personal archives. There are hours of unissued recordings of his storytelling and guitar lessons, for example, that are waiting to be preserved and to be heard by his eager following. It would honor his legacy if this material could become known and disseminated.

SONG NOTES

(SONG TITLES ARE APPROXIMATE. NO LISTS WERE MADE AT THE TIME OF THE RECORDINGS.)

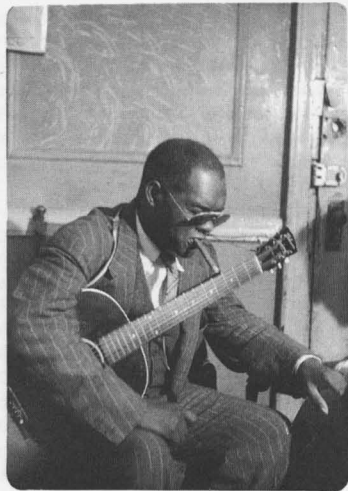
About ten of the songs from this 1953 session were neither recorded nor issued by Davis subsequently. They were part of the street and church repertoire he developed with Kinny Peebles at that time—a mixture of Davis's original compositions, sermons set to music, old traditional spirituals, and popular gospel songs. These were presented in the climate of serving the community, and perhaps gaining some income/contributions for the street performers. They didn't exist in a commercial music business ambience. They held their meaning for the Harlem community then, and their message reflected an acceptable set of religious sentiments for their listeners. In fact, specialists on Rev. Davis have pointed out that they never heard him perform many of the songs I recorded, confirming the idea that these reflected Davis's repertoire for the New York City African-American gospel community.

These musical creations have been adapted and arranged and re-arranged within the community. Each individual who has sung them, including Rev. Davis, has put a particular stamp on each song, as illustrated by Davis's statement, "I didn't write it [the song]. It came to me." This may be interpreted as a gift from God, or a gift from the community—I leave it to the reader to choose. Whether the song was by a known author or was a traditional spiritual was not his primary reason for singing it. Conveying spiritual belief was the mission.

Horace Boyer, an expert on gospel music (and former gospel singer himself), is concerned that Davis's music might no longer reach his own community. He sees Davis in a unique "insider/outsider" position in light of the fact that gospel singers find Davis's music unacceptable because he performed non-sacred material as well. This is the dilemma created between the conceptions of the (largely white) folk music audience and the rigorous demands in the black society for a traditional source. In the track notes of this recording, Boyer offers several notes

on the songs' historical origins. It will be curious to see how these old pre-folk revival recordings of Davis are received today.

In his willingness to "reach out," Davis created an anxious and uncertain place for himself. Although he always claimed to remain true to the preaching and religious traditions, he found great satisfaction bringing the "word" to his new audience. The support, appreciation, and recognition he received from the Folk Revival have carried his music further than anyone could have predicted, and much further than if he had stayed close to home. He became truly a messenger of God, a creative transformer within his tradition, and an accepted, powerful artist in the wider world.



1. IF I HAD MY WAY

This powerful performance came late in the recording session, when Davis had found his full voice. He snaps his right hand in the air while you hear the sound of his left hand hammering down on the strings. Blind Willie Johnson had recorded a version in the 1930s. Peter, Paul & Mary recorded Reverend Davis's version of "If I Had My Way" in 1963, and the royalties allowed the Davis family to buy a house in Queens, N.Y. The Grateful Dead used to sing extended versions of it at their live shows. (NOTE FROM HORACE BOYER: AS A 60-YEAR-PLUS-OLD PERSON, I STILL REMEMBER HEARING THIS SONG AS A FLORIDA BOY ["SAMSON'S LAMENT"]. IT, LIKE SO MANY OTHERS, I THINK, "JUST GREW." IT IS PART NEGRO SPIRITUAL AND PART "CHURCH REFRAIN." THAT IS, SOMEONE MIGHT HAVE STARTED THE SONG AND OTHERS ADDED TO IT. THIS IS CALLED TRADITIONAL. SEE *BLUES AND GOSPEL RECORDS 1890-1943* FOR OTHER RESEARCH ON THE SONG.)

2. IF THE LORD BE FOR YOU (I THINK I'VE WON A VICTORY)

(Rev. Gary Davis, vocal and guitar; Annie Davis, vocal)

Rev. Davis sings with Mrs. Davis in their home. "He said He would be your father, said He would be your mother, your doctor in time of sickness, your lawyer in the time of trouble." (H.B. NOTE: I'VE NEVER HEARD THIS SONG BEFORE. HOWEVER, THE LYRICS HAVE A RHYME SCHEME OF AAAB AND THE MELODIC SCHEME OF AA'AB, LEADING ME TO BELIEVE THAT IT IS A SONG MADE UP BY THE "FOLK.")

3. TWELVE GATES TO THE CITY

This is one of Reverend Davis's most beautiful songs, describing gates to the heavenly city, with no explanation of what they mean: a song about the mystery of the number twelve. "If you see my brother, tell him for me, I'm on my way to the Kingdom, meet me at Galilee." Kinny Peebles calls out encouragement, "sing it," and then sings along softly in a falsetto voice throughout the performance. (H.B. NOTE: THIS IS A MUCH-BELOVED NEGRO SPIRITUAL, AND DAVIS SINGS THE MELODY IN THE TRADITIONAL TUNE.)

4. YOU GOT TO MOVE

"You Got to Move" is one of Davis's signature songs, brilliant and vibrant in all its colorful aspects. You can hear Davis returning a bass note during the performance. The song was also recorded by the Two Gospel Keys (Disc 657, Vol. 2). Considering how different the versions can be, it is probably a well-traveled traditional song. At the end of this performance, Reverend Davis uses his guitar to imitate a preacher (himself) walking down the road and crying "Yow!" For the gambler, the drunkard, and a deacon the guitar imitates voices speaking words. (H.B.

NOTE: [THIS IS] A TRADITIONAL SONG LIKE TRACK 1. IT HAS BEEN AROUND FOREVER AND BEEN RECORDED SINCE 1938. SEE DIXON ET AL.)

5. WE ARE THE HEAVENLY FATHER'S CHILDREN

Davis sings and preaches, "Keep toiling even though teardrops fall, we have the joy of this assurance that He knows just how much we can bear. (Spoken) Sometimes you ask yourself the question, 'Lord what shall I do? Your friends have same troubles you do.... God knows how much we can bear. Your load gets heavy, but never alone to bear it all."

I felt it was a privilege to experience this sermon in the Davis home setting. On the guitar break, you hear him chopping out the melody, slowly shaping it, moving constantly up and down the guitar fingerboard. (H. B. NOTE: THIS SONG WAS ACTUALLY WRITTEN BY PHYLLIS HALL IN 1941, BUT ROBERTA MARTIN, THE PUBLISHER, PUT HER NAME ON IT.)

6. A FRIEND LIKE LONELY JESUS

The song says "Jesus, He knows all about our troubles." Davis's voice is soft at first, as in a church, evoking the form of a gospel presentation, slowly, to get things started. The chorus lays down its deliberate beat, sways, walking in rhythm. Then a solo ornamented voice elaborates the melody over the chorus. (H.B. NOTE: THE TITLE IS "NO, NOT ONE," AND THE SONG WAS COMPOSED BY JOHNSON OATMAN, JR. [1856-1922] AND GEORGE C. HUGG [1848-1907].)

7. GET RIGHT CHURCH

"Get Right Church" is a well-known Davis number. On this performance, Davis shows the trick of playing only with his left hand, followed by some very hot licks high up the neck of his guitar. The song is also known as "I'm Going Home on the Morning Train" (White 1928) and has been recorded by Molly O'Day, who was a great country gospel singer. Versions of the song were encountered in Alabama in 1915. There is a Library of Congress recording by E.M. Martin and Pearline Johns of Alligator, Mississippi, made by Alan Lomax in 1942. (H.B. NOTE: TRADITIONAL SONG, RECORDED FIRST IN 1929, SEE DIXON ET AL)

8. MARINE BAND (O DEAR, WHAT CAN THE MATTER BE?)

This song imitates individual band parts.... Davis shouts out "marine band." He frequently did marching band tunes, and must have found that others were pleased by these show pieces which evoked this particular rhythm that is so unlike gospel or church music.

9. SHINE ON ME

The song starts slowly in stretched-out 3/4 time, then gets faster as the (implied) church goes into high gear. The tempo increases to double time, the accompaniment like a second, lively voice. Blind Willie Johnson's early recording of this song follows a similar form, as does the version by Ernest Phipps and his Holiness Singers, who recorded this song in 1930 (it can be heard on the *Anthology of American Folk Music* made by Harry Smith for Folkways. Harry points out that this song can be found in practically any hymnal, usually under the title "Maitland.") (H.B. NOTE: THIS IS A TRADITIONAL NEGRO SPIRITUAL.)

10. THERE'S DESTRUCTION IN THIS LAND

(Rev. Gary Davis, vocal and guitar; Annie Davis, vocal)

"There's Destruction in This Land" is sung with Mrs. Davis. Reverend Davis wrote this song and published sheet music for it. The text anticipated the prophetic voice and imagery of topical songwriters of the 1960s, describing contemporary life in terms of destruction. "God's moving by water, land, lightning, by the storm...it pays to be ready to rest in Jesus's arms. Death is riding, calling at every door, he is calling for the rich as well as for the poor....There is no use of crying, get your house in order.... Keep this world behind you." (H.B. NOTE: ALTHOUGH I'VE NOT HEARD OF THIS SONG, IT FITS INTO THE BLACK CHURCH SCENARIO.)

11. HE STOLE AWAY

(Kinny Peebles, vocal; Rev. Gary Davis, vocal and guitar)

"He Stole Away," as performed here, is a hot guitar piece. Davis sings with Kinny Peebles, "He stole away, he went to heaven, I hope he will join the band." Imagine encountering this out on the sidewalk in Harlem where Kinny was selling frozen ices under an American flag. We hear Davis's full of bag of tricks and hot licks, with sudden guitar pauses for emphasis, drawing your attention. This is as much for dancing as for religious reflection. (H. B. NOTE: A SONG BY THE SAME TITLE WAS RECORDED BY THE LINCOLN FOUR QUARTETTE CIRCA 1928 [DIXON, ET AL].)

12. THE UNCLOUDY DAY

(Kinny Peebles, vocal; Rev. Gary Davis, vocal and guitar)

The interaction between Davis and Peebles is not rehearsed, but is based on their familiarity with one another. This performance gives a glimpse of Davis singing vigorously with a second voice—something that was lost as he became a solo performer at folk festivals and blues concerts. Davis echoes and elaborates on Peebles's lead voice. The song is well known in both black and white gospel traditions (and was also recorded by Doc Watson and the Carlisle Brothers).

13. SAY NO TO THE DEVIL

"Say no to the devil, pay no mind to the devil, he's a deceiver, he'll make you steal and gamble, he'll make you kill somebody, say no." (H.B. NOTE: SIMILAR TO TRACKS 1, 4, 7, AND 9.)

14. I BELONG TO THE BAND

Rev. Davis recorded this song on his 1935 ARC 78 recording. It was a great performance (now available on the Shanachie 2011 reissue). I had never heard of the earlier recordings when I made this one in 1953. The informed record collector or Rev. Davis fan can now compare his 1930 recordings to this 1950s one, or to any later ones in Davis's Folk Revival career, revealing that Davis was once young, got older, and got famous.... "One of these mornings, won't be long, you gonna call me and I'll be gone, I belong to the band, Hallelujah.

15. GIVE ME A HEART TO LOVE

(Kinny Peebles, vocal and guitar)

This may be an original composition, or a popular gospel song in Harlem at that time. Kinny has a fine voice, well trained in the style of gospel singing.

16. HE NEVER HAS LEFT ME ALONE

(Kinny Peebles, vocals; Rev. Davis, guitar)

Kinny sings while Davis plays on guitar. On some of the early ARC recordings Davis served as accompanist to another singer. Although it is usual to think of Davis as a soloist, it is likely that his experience within the church was to be part of a bigger congregation, where his voice and guitar were as one among many. (H.B. NOTE: THIS SONG WAS RECORDED BY THE ANGELIC GOSPEL SINGERS IN THE LATE 1950S. IT WAS A BIG HIT. MAHALIA JACKSON RECORDED IT LATER, AND CREDITS IT TO L.D. HUGGSTUTLER.)

17. GOT ON MY TRAVELING SHOES

(Rev. Gary Davis, vocal and guitar; Kinny Peebles, vocal)

Kinny sings first, then Davis enters. Davis sings his half of each chorus, completing Kinny's line. The song follows a structure similar to "If I Had My Way" with some boogie-woogie-like guitar bass lines. In the final verses sung by Rev. Davis, you feel the overriding power contained in his voice, with its combinations of growls and shouts. "I know my crown gonna to fit me well, I tried it on at the gates of hell." (H.B. NOTE: I'VE KNOWN THIS ALL MY LIFE. SEE DIXON ET AL.)

18. CIVIL WAR PARADE

From 1945 acetate recording (possibly by Tony Schwartz) on Asch AA4 1939-1945 Vol. 2.

This starts with an imitation of a trumpet playing reveille and is followed by marching feet in a parade, the rhythms and the peculiar melodic decorations and ornaments associated with martial music. Davis narrates the battle, "shoot 'em, kill 'em," to the sound of guns firing, as the parade goes on. This is the sound of patriotism and military excitement meant to thrill the heart of small boys and obedient soldiers. It is the soundtrack to a war movie, or maybe just a military drill. It becomes a caricature...ending with taps on the trumpet with a jazzy twist thrown in.

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