



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

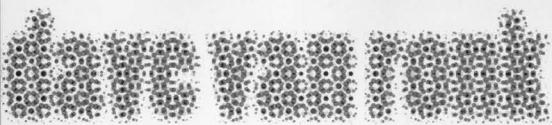
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dave van ronk

...and the tin pan bended, and the story ended...

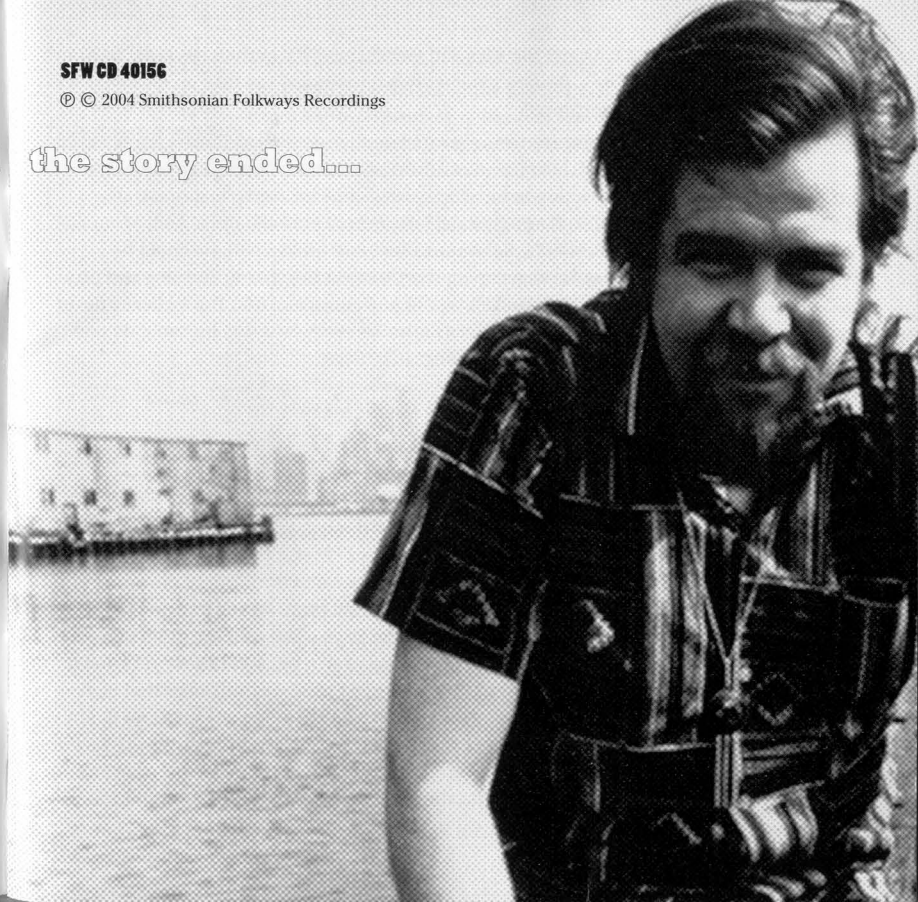


...and the tin pan bended, and the story ended...

1. **Down South Blues** 4:20
2. **Dave speaks** 7:34
3. **You've Been a Good Old Wagon** 2:04
4. **Dave speaks** 2:28
5. **Don't You Leave Me Here** 3:18
6. **Dave speaks** 1:53
7. **Did You Hear John Hurt?** 2:34
(Tom Paxton / Cherry Lane Music Publishing Co. Inc., ASCAP)
8. **Dave speaks** 5:21
9. **Green, Green Rocky Road** 3:42
(Len Chandler-Bob Kaufman / Beresford Music Inc., BMI)
10. **Dave speaks** :28
11. **Jelly Jelly** 2:49
(Billy Eckstine-Earl Hines / Advanced Music Corp., ASCAP)
12. **Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out** 3:58
(Jimmie Cox)
13. **Dave speaks** 4:41
14. **One Meatball** 1:56
(Hy Zaret-Lou Singer / Universal MCA Music Publishing-Oliver Music Publishing, ASCAP)
15. **Buckets of Rain** 4:01
(Bob Dylan / Rams Horn Music, SESAC)
16. **Dave speaks** 1:31
17. **Sometime (Whatcha Gonna Do)** 2:37
(Josh White / Folk-Blues Music Co., ASCAP)
18. **Sportin' Life Blues** 4:07
(Walter McGhee / Cireco Music, ASCAP)
19. **Dave speaks** 3:29
20. **Ace in the Hole** 4:17
(George Mitchell-James E. Dempsey-additional verses Dave Van Ronk, arranged & adapted by Dave Van Ronk / Folklore Music, ASCAP)
21. **Dave speaks** 2:57
22. **St. James Infirmary** 3:50
(Dave Van Ronk / Folklore Music, ASCAP)
23. **Thank You** 0:21
24. **Urge for Going** 4:29
(Joni Mitchell / Crazy Crow Music, ASCAP)

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introduction

ANDREA VUOCOLO

We all have pet theories and expressions. It's curious, though, how our own words, despite innumerable repetitions, can take on meanings we never anticipated.

Dave and I spent twenty years together on the road. I saw him tough it out through every kind of adverse condition: illness, dental trouble, allergic reaction to local flora, you name it—not to mention traffic woes, political intrigues, and capricious acts of nature. And, of course, the fingerpicker's nightmare: the dread broken nail. He could be counted on to show up on time, turn on the charm, and sing and play without holding back. It was important to him that the audience never suspect that anything was amiss. He often said that he could do one show sitting up in his coffin.

“Be careful what you say —
it might come true.”

We got the diagnosis on Thursday. We got in the car on Friday morning, having decided to do that weekend's shows and reschedule all future performances. We hoped and prayed that there would *be* future performances.

More than a year passed before I could bring myself to listen to the recording of what turned out to be Dave's last concert. And I was amazed. I remembered it as having been a beautiful show, yet I find it astounding that he was able—knowing what we both knew that night—to pull it off with such grace and equanimity. The audience, no doubt, never suspected a thing. It appeared to be just a normal show: a mix of old and new, lots of stories. And, as usual, only one encore. Because, as Dave used to say, you should always leave them wanting more.

Right.

January 2004

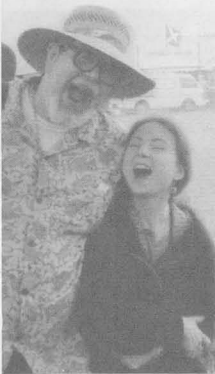
notes from the concert night, october 22, 2001

DAVID E. EISNER

Mitch Greenhill of Folklore Productions called to ask, and I was delighted to produce the show, the third Dave Van Ronk concert in four years for IMT (Institute of Musical Traditions). As a teenager in the mid-sixties, I would jump on the DeCamp bus line in front of my home in West Orange, New Jersey, plunk down my ninety cents, and ride into the Port Authority Terminal. Then I'd grab the train to West 4th Street in the Village. One night, I wandered into The Gaslight Café and heard a young folksinger named Dave Van Ronk: great stories; gravelly voice; hoarse belly laugh; crisp, clean guitar sound. I was an instant fan. I shopped on 8th Street at the discount record stores to buy *Dave Van Ronk—Folksinger* for \$1.79. So started my love affair with the man and his music. Thirty-five years later, I was glad to have another chance to produce a show with one of my heroes. My recollection of the evening follows.

Dave had called to say he wasn't feeling well—could I book a hotel room for the Sunday night before the Monday show, as well as for Monday evening? “No problem,” I said, and asked if there was anything else I could do for him. He said no, but if it was OK with me and the audience, he requested that he play one long set instead of two forty-five minute halves. Again, no problem, I know better than to displease my idols.

Dave was a perfect match for our venue. When he played, the room was transformed into an intimate living room, with about 125 of his closest friends. In the recording, you can feel that warm connection between performer and audience, one of those special occasions when the component parts far exceed the whole. Of course Dave's one long set exceeded the length of two shorter sets because, as Dave would say, “When I get up a good head of steam, watch out!”—and his laugh would drown out the applause.





The concert performance by Dave Van Ronk was sponsored by The Institute of Musical Traditions. Located in Takoma Park, MD, IMT is a nonprofit (501c3) dedicated to preserving and promoting folk music and its cultures. For more information on IMT concerts, events and workshops, please visit www.imtfolk.org or call (301) 754-3611.

Dave gave a strong performance, and no one could detect that anything was wrong. He hit us with his best stuff, and we alternated between moments transfixed in pathos and having our eyes fill with tears of laughter.

After the show, several folks waited in the lobby for Dave to come out. After twenty minutes or so, I went back to the green room to let him know that he had friends outside who wanted to say hello. What happened next was my first inkling that something was very wrong. Dave was sitting, really more slumping, in a chair, looking quite ashen. I asked if he wanted to come out to say hello. He looked up at me and said, "No, I'm spent; tell them, 'Not tonight.'"

To those of us there that night, and to thousands more around the world, Dave was "family." You think that you can be prepared for the loss of a relative you love. Not really. Hopefully, Dave is up there arm-wrestling with his good buddy Mississippi John Hurt, or strolling through the clouds with Phil Ochs. Thank you, Dave, for saying, "Sure, you can record tonight, just send me a copy!"

*In Harmony,
David E. Eisner, President
Institute of Musical Traditions*

the mayor of macdougal street

TOM PAXTON

You have here a recording of the last concert performed by my best friend, Dave Van Ronk. How extraordinarily fortunate we are to have it! I was not among the lucky ones to hear and see it, but let me tell you, instead, about the first concert I heard him give. Well, not a concert, exactly; more a short set, but it was enough to convince me I was hearing a unique artist. I think my exact words were, "Holy shit!"—but my memory might be failing me here. I was in Greenwich Village in New York City in the spring of 1960, on a weekend pass from my employer, the U.S. Army. As I did each weekend, I dropped my stuff at the apartment of an old college pal and hotfooted it over to MacDougal Street. There were many, many coffeehouses scattered along MacDougal Street, Bleecker Street, and W. Third Street. Well to the east on W. Fourth Street stood Gerde's Folk City, the only one of these venues selling alcohol. My custom was to go around to them all, clutching my nylon-stringed Goya guitar and hoping to be allowed to do a guest set here and there. Sometimes I even got hired to sub for some folksinger who'd failed to turn up for work. If I made any money, I might finish the night with a triumphant beer at Folk City.

Headquarters was The Gaslight, a cellar coffeehouse midway down MacDougal between W. Third and Bleecker. It was owned by a fascinating, slightly paranoid character named John Mitchell, who conceived the mad notion that, because of my army haircut, I had to be an undercover cop. Why someone going undercover in the Village would have a short haircut was a question that had apparently never occurred to him. Directly across from The Gaslight and down a dark and narrow tenement passageway was the entrance to a rather large coffeehouse called The Commons. It was owned by a guy named Rod MacDonald, and Rod had just hired Dave to run the entertainment. This was definitely a case of hiring the fox to check on the chickens: Dave hired his friends. Luckily, his friends were damned good. I





always enjoyed going in there, and one night I began talking with Dave. For some unfathomable reason, this child of Brooklyn—this scruffy hard-scrabble cynic—seemed to take to a bright-eyed, hopelessly naive son of small-town Oklahoma. It may have been simply because we both liked to look at the world and laugh a lot. I heard Dave perform the first night I went to The Commons. The custom in those days was to have six or seven performers, each of whom would do three or four songs. When the last performer—Dave—had done his turn, the audience was encouraged, cajoled, or chivvied into leaving. This was called “turning over the house.” New tourists, down for a visit to the wicked Village where the Beat poets used the F-word a lot, would charge in for the empty tables, and the whole cycle would begin again. It was common to run through the sets six or seven times

“Sometimes you have to forget your

on a weekend night. (The poets, by the way, including people like Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Bob Kaufman, were an important part of the mix and much more substantive than the tourists expected.) It was great training, really, these short sets that we did. What we learned each time was how to begin a set, what to do next, and how to get off. In due course, it was Dave’s turn in the barrel. He was a physically imposing character, what anyone but a mother would call a bit of a galoot, standing over six feet tall and with plenty of heft to him. He lurched to the stage, which immediately seemed smaller. Seated in a straight-back chair, he began something called “Duncan and Brady,” which he’d learned from a singer named Paul Clayton. It was a song from an LP Dave had recorded for Folkways Records. I was bowled over by the way Dave used the guitar. In my world, most of us made do with a boom-chicka, boom-chicka sort of accompaniment; Dave’s

right-hand fingers danced across and through the strings and made the guitar an intimate partner in the song. It was baffling and thrilling, and I knew I had to begin to learn that style. Forty years on, I’m still learning, and I take some comfort in knowing that much better guitarists than I have despaired of matching Dave’s playing.

Dave sang “Betty and Dupree” and “Hesitation Blues” and one more song before turning the house. He told me to stick around, and either that night or the next he asked me to do a guest set. Soon, he was using me on Friday and Saturday nights, and oh, how the money rolled in! The Commons, like most of the coffeehouses in 1960, was a baskethouse, which meant that a Village chick (it’s how we described them in the days before our sexist consciousnesses got raised), dressed in black with lots of eye shadow and big hair, was stationed at

principles and do what’s right.”



either door. Having been thoroughly briefed on the subject during the turnover pitch, the exiting patrons dropped money in the basket on their way out. The pot was divvied at the end of the evening, and I usually got around ten dollars. It sounds puny, and it was, but it allowed me to skip the mess hall for lunch during the week—a working definition of luxury at the time. Very early in our friendship, Dave gave me a guitar lesson that pushed my playing into a completely new direction. It’s not saying too much to claim that all the finger-style guitar I’ve played in the years since then came from that one lesson. It was agonizing for both of us, and I’m quite sure that if he hadn’t liked me a lot, he would have given up. It involved learning to use the thumb as a steady on-the-beat timekeeper, alternating between the bottom three strings. Wait! It gets worse! While this is going on, the first and second fingers are bouncing around on the top three strings, sometimes on

"Life is not a moral gymnasium."



the beat and sometimes in syncopation, either creating an accompanying rhythm, or playing the melody. Dave taught me the basic version of all this, which was absolutely all I was capable of grasping. With the patience of a saint, he took me through it time after time, until, mercifully, I got it. I'm sure he was relieved to see me depart. I played that night at The Gaslight, and I still remember beginning "The Golden Vanity" with great confidence, putting into play all my newfound skills. I made it through one verse before my right hand had had enough and totally cramped. I don't know how I finished it, and I hope Dave wasn't there to see it.

Dave was a true craftsman, a standing rebuke for the lazier of us in the way he painstakingly worked out the arrangements for every piece in his repertoire while we still went chucka, chucka, chucka. You can hear it in his earliest recordings. Knowing that the best way to learn is to teach, he had guitar students all his years, right up until he entered the hospital. Since his guitar was always at hand in his digs, he was always noodling his way into some of the best transcriptions we hackers had ever heard, most notably his version of Scott Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag." I was told a few years ago by a superb guitarist—a teacher himself—that he and a few friends had assigned themselves sections of Dave's version of "Maple Leaf," hoping to learn how he did it. They all gave up trying, but at a memorial concert for Dave at The Bottom Line, I saw more than one guitarist carrying dog-eared books of guitar arrangements from their lessons with him, still hoping, for his sake, to get it right. Dave's apartments, including the famous salon at 190 Waverly Place, were magnets for the rest of us. God knows why he didn't just kick us out more often than he did, but he seemed to enjoy the



hubbub. His enormous record collection meant that he owned recordings none of us had even heard of. He liked turning us on to the really

classical performances of Joplin's rags, the ethereal voice of the Irish tenor John McCormack, or some early Louis Armstrong. One of the favorite ethnic LPs of the time was *The Music Of Bulgaria*, and Dave set words to one of the most memorable of those tunes and called it "Honey Hair." His real passion was for jazz. He was, in fact, a great jazz singer, and he was quoted as saying, "I never really thought of myself as a 'folksinger' at all. Still don't. What I did was to combine traditional finger-picking guitar with a repertory of old jazz tunes." I never really

bought that line, truth to tell. Anybody who could sing Appalachian Mountain ballads like "Willie Moore" or "The Brown Girl," lumberjack songs like "The Shantymen's Life," or dozens and dozens of other traditional folksongs with his authority was a folksinger in my book, whatever else he might also have been. But he really did love jazz. I heard him in a head-to-head bullshit-cutting session with another jazz fan named Jan Kindler that was unforgettable. They were referring to recording sessions in 1928 with Louis Armstrong or King Oliver and naming each and every sideman on those sessions, interrupting each other to mention that no, so-and-so missed that session because of the flu and was replaced by such-and-such on slide trombone, and on and on. It was delicious, show-offy jazz of its own. Dave won.

From the days before I knew him to the day he died, Dave Van Ronk was a nurturer, a Dutch uncle (if I may) to dozens of young performers, myself included. He and I had done our three-song sets at a Monday night hootenanny at Gerde's Folk City in early 1961. We sat together drinking beer in the crammed neighborhood bar that had

“Take care of your vices and your virtues will take care of themselves.”

become a folk-music mecca in New York when Israel Young, who had the Folklore Center on MacDougal Street, persuaded Mike Porco to set up a stage and a microphone and put on folk music. It worked. You never knew who'd drop in for a few songs—but for sure, every young musician was there Monday after Monday. So we were only half paying attention when this skinny kid with a black corduroy cap, a harmonica rack, and a battered Gibson got up on the tiny stage. We snapped to, however, when he went into some Woody Guthrie song or other with a whiny kind of voice that nevertheless put the song right in one's head. It was, of course, Bob Dylan's first set in New York, and it was a good one. Dave took Bob under his wing, and had him over to his apartment on W. 15th Street often. He encouraged Bob's songwriting, and had a lot to do with Bob's quick acceptance. He did it for so many others, as well—artists like Cliff Eberhardt, Bill Morrissey, and Tom Intondi. He encouraged Suzanne Vega when she was playing at The Speakeasy on MacDougal Street. Christine Lavin was waiting tables at The Caffè Lena in Saratoga Springs when Dave made one of his many appearances there. She got up the nerve to sing him one of her songs, and he gruffly told her she should get her ass down to New York and get busy. She did, and became one of his guitar students and talking pals, and a unique and successful artist.

David Massengill, the Tennessee ballad-writer, storyteller, and mountain dulcimer player, got an early boost in his career by going on the road as Dave's driver and opening act. Dave never learned to drive, remarking with scorn that no true son of Brooklyn would stoop to it. Massengill tells of driving an enormous, clunky old Mercury sedan that Dave somehow had the use of on at least two trips of a month or more each, and on many short hops. At each gig, Dave would add David to the bill as his opener, or, if an opener had already been booked, would insert him into his own show. Once, he had David

drive him to the Mariposa Festival in Toronto, and when Bob Gibson was ill one morning, Dave persuaded Stan Rogers to let David take Bob's place in a workshop that Stan was leading. Massengill recalls Stan's saying that if Dave thought highly of Massengill (whom he had never heard), then that was good enough for him. Soon, according to David, a host of better-known folksingers, hearing of Bob's illness, came by, hoping to take his place. To all of them, Stan said, “No, Dave Van Ronk brought me someone he likes, and he's going to do the workshop. Period.”

“Don't borrow trouble.”

According to Massengill, Dave would limit radio listening

in the car to one hour only, insisting that after that it was merely repetition. They would talk, instead, and David recalls listening to Dave expound on the universe, science fiction (he had read all of it, and I mean all of it), politics, and baseball history. Dave hadn't finished high school, but only a tiny fraction of Ph.D.'s would have read so widely or so deeply as he had, and only a fraction of them would have retained so much of what they'd read.

In 1981, Dave had the great good fortune of meeting Andrea Vuocolo in New York. She was working as a designer, and the job was nothing like as glamorous as it sounds. In fact, she gave it up and went off to hang out in Italy for a while. In 1982, Stefan Grossman of Kicking Mule Records brought Dave over to Italy to finish up a recording project, and Dave wired Andrea that he was coming. They hooked up there, and when she came back to New York, Andrea moved into Dave's apartment on Sheridan Square. They were married in 1988. At about a pint and a half to Dave's two gallons, she was still more than a match for him. He treasured her, and she, him.



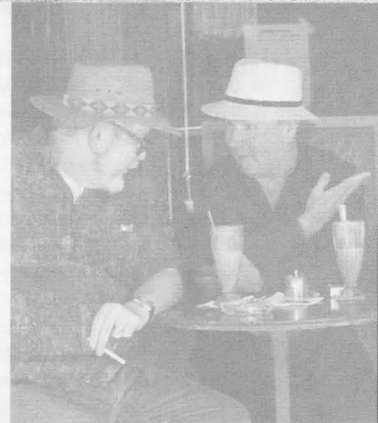
Dave's politics were always a source of wonder to a child of Oklahoma. He took politics very seriously, although he could be funny about them too. For a while, he belonged to the Socialist Workers' Party, a Trotskyite group, but he simply wasn't made for party discipline and finally left. He was very understanding about my complete incomprehension of what all that was about, and he took great pleasure in ragging me about my naive political consciousness. Now and then, he would come back from a meeting describing with no little glee the polemical bloodbaths that regularly occurred there. People would labor for hours every night between meetings, according to Dave, to compose some lethal forty-page screed attacking a new and heretical splinter group that had arisen in the ranks. One day, I asked him how many members this revolutionary party had. About forty or fifty, he admitted. It reminded me of my friend, the late Scottish songwriter Matt McGinn, who, expelled from the Party for daring to hold independent views, formed a socialist party of his own with a fellow

dishwasher at a Glasgow restaurant. It lasted for a week, until they too had a schismatic explosion. Ah, there's nothing like the Left for cohesion!

As I write, I'm listening to Dave's first recordings on Folkways Records. Folkways

was Moses Asch's incomparable contribution to the documenting of traditional music. I remember Dave describing his first Folkways recording, mentioning that his picture appeared nowhere on the album, prompting many people to assume he was black. To his disgust, the cover art was a picture of an espresso machine. Be all that as it may, he started as he finished, with great attention to detail. The guitar was his partner, not his pony. I'm listening to "Twelve Gates to the City," which he learned from the singing of the Reverend Gary Davis, a

prodigious guitarist and influence on many a New York musician. Dave does the song his way, with his arrangement, and it's glorious. He was always ready to acknowledge influences and sources. Like many artists of his era, he took pride in being part of an ongoing tradition—in his case, more jazz than folk. When he wrote (which he did, not prolifically, but tellingly), it was always clear that it was in those contexts that he wrote. He was surely a link in the chain of tradition. He was a gentle man and a gentleman. He was thoughtful about the feelings of others, and he knew that his size and his reputation could be overawing to young artists, so he took care to be kind and funny with them. There isn't any counting the number of artists he affected positively; they'll be coming forth for decades to come to tell us about it. You are hearing Dave's final concert, and to say that is almost unbearably painful to me. Goodbye, Davey. You were the last bohemian and the last "Mayor of MacDougal Street." You were a grace note in the lives of all those who were lucky enough to know you. We'll miss you for the rest of our lives.



Tom Paxton
Alexandria, Va.
November 2003

"I need that like
a moose needs a
hatrack."

"I'd rather be boiled
in skunk piss!"

track notes

ELIJAH WALD

1. Down South Blues Dave was always a great admirer of Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell, the most popular blues duo of the late 1920s and 1930s. This was a relatively rare taste among the hardcore folk-blues crowd, which was prejudiced against pianists (the piano was not a true folk instrument, after all) and the studio blues stars of the 1930s, whose work was considered mechanical and repetitive, compared with that of more rural-sounding artists, like Blind Lemon Jefferson and Charlie Patton. Dave worked out guitar parts based on Carr's piano lines ("Midnight Hour Blues" being a prime example), and considered him one of the great blues lyricists. As for Blackwell, Dave was always impressed by his clean, sharp guitar work on Carr's records, and copped many of his trademark licks. "Down South" was one of the few records that Blackwell did on his own, and Dave retains much of the original arrangement. According to the repertoire list he assembled on file cards in the early 1960s, Dave was already doing this song at that time, but he first recorded it in the mid 1970s, on his album *Sunday Street*, after which it became one of his standards and a favorite show-opener.

2. Dave speaks

3. You've Been a Good Old Wagon Dave cared about history with the deep devotion of a true Marxist (with anarcho-syndicalist tendencies), but onstage he was a showman, and never let dry facts get in the way of a good story. He had learned this song from Bessie Smith's recording, and had an interesting reminiscence about Clarence Williams, and in the interest of connecting the intro to the song he did not bother to check its authorship. In fact, although Williams was Smith's original producer and frequent accompanist, this was not one of his compositions, nor did he play on Smith's record of it, made in 1925 with Fred Longshaw on piano and Louis Armstrong on cornet.

As to who did write the song, that is something of a mystery. A sheet-music hit by the same title was published in 1895 by Ben Harney, one of the most popular ragtime composers, but it is a completely different song. Smith's record credits her and someone named Balcom, but other sources give the author as "John Henry," apparently a pseudonym for Perry Bradford, the producer of Mamie Smith's groundbreaking "Crazy Blues" and one of Williams's main competitors. In any case, the lyric's wry humor suited Dave's style, and he backed it with one of his most typical arrangements, a simple chart that sets off the lyric without getting in the way.

4. Dave speaks

5. Don't You Leave Me Here If Dave had been forced to choose his favorite musicians of all time, he would probably have started the list with Louis Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton, and a list of his favorite composers would have started with Morton and Duke Ellington. His previous recordings of Morton's work include sophisticated compositions like "Sweet Substitute" and "The Pearls," but he was particularly drawn to a handful of solo vocal-and-piano sides that Morton did in the 1940s. When Dave quit singing with jazz bands and became a solo performer, he used these as a bridge between the two worlds, regularly singing "Buddy Bolden's Blues," "Winin' Boy," "Mamie's Blues," and "Don't You Leave Me Here." All were textbook examples of how to adapt jazz skills to a blues context, not by adding fancy filigree, but by using subtle harmonic and rhythmic colors to produce studies in tasteful minimalism. Dave's guitar arrangements perfectly captured what he loved about Morton's piano work, with its lilting melody and musing hesitations.

Often called "Alabama Bound," this song turned up in a reworked version as "Baby Please Don't Go," a hit for Big Joe Williams the 1930s,

and has been done untold times since. It almost certainly predates the blues boom, and has frequently been cited as an example of the sort of earlier tune that evolved into the fixed, twelve-bar form. Morton, as was his wont, claimed to have originated the theme, saying that after he had begun traveling to Alabama and Mississippi, envious competitors copied it from him. Music historians insist that it was already a standard before he came on the scene, but as Dave once wrote of Morton's claim to have invented jazz in 1902: "There is little point in argument."

6. Dave speaks

7. Did You Hear John Hurt? Dave's introduction says it all, as far as his friendship with John Hurt went. Dave had loved Hurt's music ever since he first heard it, on Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*. When Hurt was "rediscovered" in the 1960s, it was as if the ghost of Bach or Buddy Bolden had suddenly walked into the folk clubs. Dave met Hurt at a gig in Boston that ended with a party and a snowball fight, and then tried to hear him every time the chance presented itself—which was pretty often, because Hurt became a regular visitor to The Gaslight Café, "the cellar" of this song, which was downstairs from the Kettle of Fish, "the bar." Dave and Paxton were both Gaslight regulars (Dave hosted the Tuesday night hoots), and even more regular at the Kettle (where Dave actually preferred to spend the hoot nights). Dave often described the evening when, after copious consumption of Old Grandad, Hurt beat him, Ramblin' Jack Elliott, and Sam Hood (The Gaslight's manager and a college football star) at arm wrestling, twice running. At the time, Hurt would have been about seventy years old.

Dave sometimes told a story of asking Paxton to write another verse for this song, because he felt it was too short. In Dave's telling, Paxton

got all huffy and responded, "That song is perfect the way it is." A few years later, they were both at a festival, and Paxton came up and said, "You know, I decided that you were right. I've written a third verse to 'Did You Hear John Hurt?'"

"I looked at him, and I said, 'Tom, that song is perfect just the way it is,'" Dave recalled with a characteristic cackle. "And I wouldn't let him sing it for me."

8. Dave speaks

9. Green, Green Rocky Road Len Chandler came to New York in the late 1950s, after winning a scholarship playing the oboe in Akron, Ohio. On arriving, he immediately went to the Folklore Center on MacDougal Street, where he saw Dave playing guitar—the first time he had ever seen fingerstyle picking. They became friends, and Dave brought Chandler down to Washington Square, introducing him to the folk scene. Shortly, Chandler was the house musician at The Gaslight Café, across the street from where Dave was working, at The Commons. As Chandler recalls it, the poet Bob Kaufman first mentioned "Green, Green Rocky Road" one night when he was at Chandler's place for dinner. Chandler was taken with the song, and worked out a singable melody; then the two of them collaborated on the verses. (The chorus was based on an old African-American children's-game song.) Though Dave does not mention Chandler in his introduction here, he often explained that Kaufman couldn't carry a tune, so his version of the song had no recognizable melody and Chandler, being a trained musician, was the only person who could make head or tail of it and transform it into something that could be sung. It became one of the two or three most requested and oft-sung numbers in Dave's repertoire.

10. Dave speaks

11. Jelly Jelly The raison d'être for this album, aside from capturing a live show complete with stories, was for Dave to record the arrangements he had worked out in the years since his previous solo outing. "Jelly Jelly" is a case in point. Where Dave learned the song is a bit of a mystery, as his old repertoire cards credit it to Josh White, but White's "Jelly Jelly" was a straight twelve-bar blues, and had nothing in common with this song but the title. This jazz ballad was a huge hit for Billy Eckstine with the Earl Hines Orchestra in the early 1940s, and perfectly captures the moody, late-night cabaret feel of that period. Dave liked to describe himself as a cabaret singer, insisting that despite his repertoire he had more in common with people like Peggy Lee than with any country bluesman. Back in the 1960s though, the folk-blues world was not interested in hearing him sing smooth café numbers—nor had he yet developed the guitar techniques he needed to play them properly.

In the 1970s, Dave temporarily retired from the road and devoted himself to teaching guitar. During that period, he worked out a series of complex ragtime arrangements. These were extraordinary pieces in themselves, but he regarded them primarily as means to an end: "I'm a singer," he would say. "And I'm very fussy about accompaniments. So everything that I've learned to do on the guitar has been directed toward giving myself a better backup. My idol in this regard is Duke Ellington, who paid attention to things like voicings, timbre, dynamics, tone color. That's the kind of thinking that I've tried to employ as a guitarist. When I play 'Maple Leaf Rag,' there are a hundred and fifty guitarists around the world who could tear me a new asshole playing pretty much the same arrangement, but I never did that so I could do that. That was a research project. And what I learned from learning how to do that has been applied hundreds and hundreds of times to accompaniments for singing, which is what I do do." The new

accompaniments on this set prove that in his final years. Dave had reached another level as an arranger, and they reflect this mature, unique understanding of his instrument.

12. Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out

This was the first song Dave ever released, on an Elektra Records anthology called *Our Singing Heritage*. He sometimes explained that it had been introduced by a comedian whose name he remembered as Joe Cox: "He used to do this little skit, a dramatic set-up where at first he's in tie and tails and he has beautiful women falling off his arms and is calling for drinks at Delmonico's. Then it segued to a thing where he's in rags and all the people who were hanging out with him are kicking him out, and he steps out to the apron of the stage and closes the skit with this song. I picked it up when I was singing with jazz bands, and when I recorded it, my mother heard it and said, 'Oh, that's the old Joe Cox tune.' Her mother had heard Joe Cox do it in vaudeville."

Cox's name was actually Jimmie, and he was a star of black vaudeville in the teens, known as "The Black Charlie Chaplin," as well as father to Gertrude "Baby" Cox, the growling vocalist of the early Ellington band. Clarence Williams, who acquired the publishing rights to "Nobody Knows You" in the late 1920s, recalled that "Jimmie was a great all-around entertainer and actor on the old TOBA circuit. . . . He used to dramatize this blues of his with his girl partner—show how a man can fall out with his baby, hit the road, and get down sick with the TB. Then on his last go-round, he'd sing this number, and, man, he'd make you believe it. Bessie Smith used to work with Jimmie on these shows. She learned the song from him and made a record of it, using old man Eddie Heywood's arrangement. . . . That record of Bessie's just went rolling around this old world."

Dave kept singing “Nobody Knows You” off and on into the 1980s, but by that time, he had grown dissatisfied with his guitar part. He finally dropped it, only to reintroduce it some ten years later in the version heard here. Along with completely transforming his backing chart, he had written a new introductory section, a sweetly sophisticated ragtime melody, over which he paints a picture of a down-and-out street singer. Dave respected the Tin Pan Alley tunesmiths as much as the blues masters, but in neither case did he consider their compositions inviolate. If he thought a song was too short or a lyric was dated, he never hesitated to improve on it, and many of his changes have since become part of the folk-blues repertoire, though few people who sing them are aware that they are his work.

13. Dave speaks

14. One Meatball Like everyone else, Dave got this from Josh White. The history he gives in his introduction, while not entirely accurate, is no weirder than the truth. The song began as a satire on medieval minstrel balladry, “The Lay of the Lone Fish Ball,” apparently written by a Harvard Latin professor, George Martin Lane, in the 1850s (though its first publication, in 1855, is credited to a Richard Storrs Willis). It became a popular ditty among the college crowd, and sometime in the next decade or two, Francis James Child and James Russell Lowell took it upon themselves to dress it in fancy clothing, Child producing the one-act Italian opera, *Il Pesceballo*, with a English translation by Lowell. (Both texts were published by the Caxton Club, Chicago, in 1899.) I can find no evidence that Longfellow was involved, but it is possible that the others were just too drunk to remember him. As “The Lone Fish Ball,” the song appeared in Sigmund Spaeth’s *Read ‘Em And Weep: The Songs You Forgot To Remember* (1926), and it was in that form that it was heard at a party in the early 1940s by the

Tin Pan Alley songwriters Hy Zaret (who later wrote the lyric to “Unchained Melody”) and Lou Singer. They transformed it into “One Meatball,” and it was simultaneously introduced at the two Café Society nightclubs: Josh sang it at the Greenwich Village room, and the comedian Jimmy Savo did it uptown. Josh’s version was his biggest hit, shortly covered by the Andrews Sisters, and so on down to Dave.

15. Buckets of Rain If in later years Dave developed an aversion to interviewers, it was largely due to being pestered for Dylan stories. He was one of Dylan’s first champions, among the few people in New York who recognized the scruffy young singer as an embryonic genius. Dave’s first wife, Terri Thal, became Dylan’s manager, and Dylan wound up many of his early nights in the Village crashed out on the Van Rons’ couch. Dylan loved blues, and he absorbed much of Dave’s repertoire and guitar style: “Chimes of Freedom” was set to an old song called “Chimes of Trinity,” which Dave had learned from his grandmother, and Dylan’s first album included Dave’s arrangement of “House of the Rising Sun,” shortly copied with worldwide success by the Animals. Dave and Dylan had a brief falling out over the latter song, as Dave had planned on recording it first, but they remained friends until Dylan quit the Village scene.

While other people noted Dave’s influence on Dylan, Dave was quick to point out that their relationship was always a two-way street. “We were all copping things from each other,” he would say. He considered Dylan the key songwriter on the folk scene, and recorded several of his early efforts: “If I Had to Do It All Over Again, I’d Do It All Over You,” “The Old Man,” “Song to Woody,” “Subterranean Homesick Blues.” His serious interest in Dylan’s work ended in the 1960s though, and he remained only vaguely aware of the later compositions. Then he happened to be playing a gig in Rochester in the late 1990s, and his

opening act, Karen Almquist, did this song from *Blood on the Tracks*. Her version struck him in a way that Dylan's hadn't, and he worked out this arrangement.

16. Dave speaks

17. Sometime (Whatcha Gonna Do) This is an urban variation on the old "Crawdad Song" ("You get a line, and I'll get a pole, honey"). In the liner notes to Josh White's original recording, Alan Lomax wrote:

"Sometime" is *the* folksong of the period after World War I, a time of soaring boom and sudden, violent depression, a time of questioning for all Americans. For the people who picked guitars and sang folksongs, this was a time of hunger and homelessness and for such sharp questions as "Sometime" asks. . . . It was a time when a lot of folks were living on crawfish and were asking: *What you gonna do when the pond goes dry?*

The singer answers: *Sit on the bank and watch the crawdads die.*

Yet other stanzas paint a picture of the impoverished Southern sharecropper. . . . The people were asking the questions and there were no easy answers. No silver linings to these dark clouds. . . . Just turn up that jug of moonshine and . . . *Put your hand on your hip and let your mind roll by, my honey, 'Cause your body's gonna shrivel when you come to die.* None of which explains who wrote this version, which is about city streets and prostitution, rather than crawfish and sharecroppers. It may well have been Josh himself.

18. Sportin' Life Blues Brownie McGhee first recorded this song in 1946 or 1947, for a small New York label, Alert Records, but he often said he had written it back in the 1930s, sometimes adding that it was

composed after his mother's death. The melody had been recorded in 1929 by the Duke Ellington band, as "Rent Party Blues," credited to Ellington and his alto saxophonist, Johnny Hodges, but it was McGhee's version that became a blues standard. Dave almost always told a story to introduce this song, left off here out of time considerations. He would explain that he had learned it in the 1950s, when he was a beardless youth of fifteen, but felt ridiculous singing it because he clearly hadn't experienced enough to give it its proper weight. Years went by, and every once in a while, he would dust it off, but always concluded that he still hadn't paid enough dues. Finally, he figured, "To hell with the dues." It was too good a song to keep on the shelf, and he started doing it. Then, one day, he happened to be playing a gig in a town where McGhee and his partner, Sonny Terry, were also working. Dave went over to see them, and later, in the dressing room, played McGhee his version of the song. McGhee seemed to enjoy it thoroughly, they had a nice visit, and as Dave was leaving, it occurred to him to ask, "By the way, Brownie, how old were you when you wrote that song?" Brownie said, "Fifteen."

19. Dave speaks

20. Ace in the Hole This song was apparently published as sheet music in 1909, but it first hit in 1926, when a half-dozen recordings of it appeared (one, oddly enough, in Berlin, Germany). All were by minor white bands, like the University Six and the Black Diamond Sere-naders, and the song more or less disappeared until it was revived in a recording by Bunk Johnson with the San Francisco-based Yerba Buena Jazz Band in 1944. This was the flagship band of the West Coast wing of the "mouldy figs," the people who believed that the word *jazz* should be limited to the New Orleans music of the teens and twenties. Dave began his musical apprenticeship in this troglodyte faction of

the jazz world—he told of some friends going to a jazz festival and leaving in disgust because Charlie Parker had been invited—and though he shortly outgrew its prejudices, he retained his love of the music. (Incidentally, his involvement in the “mouldy fig” wars is not unconnected to the Troskyite factionalism Tom Paxton mentions in his notes. Dave was always an enthusiastic arguer.) As soon as he got on a label with a little money to spend, he recorded an album with the Red Onion Jazz Band, *In the Tradition*, which included this song. He did not play it on guitar, though, until the late 1990s, when he worked out the present chart. At that point, he realized that it was too short, so he also wrote a second verse and most of the second chorus.

21. Dave speaks

22. St. James Infirmary Dave would sometimes tell of singing this song while sitting in with a jazz group at the Stuyvesant Casino in the early 1950s, and having Jimmy Rushing, the legendary vocalist of the Count Basie Orchestra, add a couple of verses from a seat at the bar. On his old repertoire cards, he gave his source for this as “Josh White / ‘Unfortunate Rake’ cycle.” White’s version was the standard template for folksingers of Dave’s generation, and *The Unfortunate Rake* was an album compiled for Folkways by the folklorist Kenneth S. Goldstein, who produced Dave’s first two solo albums. Goldstein assembled the LP as a teaching aid, showing the evolution of this ballad from a 19th-century English broadside about a young man dying of syphilis, through a change of gender and continent into “The Bad Girl’s Lament,” a journey west to become “The Streets of Laredo,” and various other permutations, including Dave’s recording of this African-American variant. Goldstein wrote that the original St. James Hospital was “a religious foundation for the redemption of ‘fourteen sisters, maidens, that were leperous [*sic*], living chastely and honestly in divine

service.” Not Dave’s kind of joint, but fortunately the folk process provided him with more congenial surroundings.

Dave’s early recordings of this song did not include the guitar break, which he once told me he had written in the early 1960s just to piss off Danny Kalb. Kalb, who went on to be the lead guitarist in Dave’s Ragtime Jug Stompers, then to rock stardom with the Blues Project, came to Dave for guitar lessons, and annoyed the hell out of him by learning all the arrangements instantly and playing them more cleanly than Dave could. In revenge, Dave said, he gave Kalb one last lesson, at the end of which, as Kalb was walking out the door, he played him this guitar break, then threw him out without showing him how it was done.

23. Thank you

24. Urge for Going Dave considered Joni Mitchell the finest songwriter to emerge from the folk revival, and he was one of her early champions. His one attempt at a hit single was a version of her then-unknown “Both Sides Now”—a beautiful record that lost out when Judy Collins released her own single of it. For many years, almost every album Dave made included a Mitchell song, but “Urge for Going” was the first he ever heard and it remained his favorite. His story about that first encounter was also a favorite, though not one he would tell from the stage, since it hardly fit the mood of the song:

“I was doing a TV show in Winnipeg, and on the plane out of Buffalo, I ran into Patrick Sky, one of my favorite people, then and now. We had both been up for something like seventy-two hours, working and drinking and working and drinking, and had drunk ourselves sober and drunk and sober again, so that the only thing that was keeping us going at this point was the steady consumption of bourbon. The show

was being broadcast from a college auditorium, and as we were waiting back in this huge dressing room area that all the performers were sharing, we noticed this beautiful blonde sitting off by herself. She was playing guitar and singing to herself, just warming up, and I don't know how it happened, but after a few minutes everything was completely quiet and everybody was just listening to her. That was Joni, and she was singing "Urge for Going," and none of us had ever heard anything like it. We were all standing around, the tech people and performers, and she finished the song, and there was just this utter, stunned silence. And then Patrick turns to me and says, "That sucks!" It was the highest compliment Patrick was capable of bestowing."

"Why must the show go on?"



credits

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Christine Lavin

Executive producer: Mitch Greenhill

Recorded by David Eisner, October 22, 2001,
in Adelphi, MD

Mastered by Phillip Klum at Jigsaw Sound,
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Annotated by Andrea Vuocolo, David Eisner,
Tom Paxton and Elijah Wald

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DAVE VAN ROK ...and the tin pan bended and the story ended... SFW CD 40156



"I wanted to play jazz in the worst way — and I did."

For a performer who never dreamt of being a "folksinger," Dave Van Ronk left a deep mark on the entire folksong revival. His jazz-trained voice, masterful guitar technique, and sharp wit endeared him to audiences everywhere; his generosity of spirit earned him friendship with artists such as Phil Ochs, Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Mississippi John Hurt, and Christine Lavin. This October 2001 recording of his last concert features the incomparable "Mayor of MacDougal Street" at his lively best.

14 songs plus spoken words; 32-page booklet, photos, 79 mins

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1 Down South Blues 4:20 | 12 Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out 3:58 |
| 2 Dave speaks 7:34 | 13 Dave speaks 4:41 |
| 3 You've Been a Good Old Wagon 2:04 | 14 One Meatball 1:56 |
| 4 Dave speaks 2:28 | 15 Buckets of Rain 4:01 |
| 5 Don't You Leave Me Here 3:18 | 16 Dave speaks 1:31 |
| 6 Dave speaks 1:53 | 17 Sometime (Whatcha Gonna Do) 2:37 |
| 7 Did You Hear John Hurt? 2:34 | 18 Sportin' Life Blues 4:07 |
| 8 Dave speaks 5:21 | 19 Dave speaks 3:29 |
| 9 Green, Green Rocky Road 3:42 | 20 Ace in the Hole 4:17 |
| 10 Dave speaks :28 | 21 Dave speaks 2:57 |
| 11 Jelly Jelly 2:49 | 22 St. James Infirmary 3:50 |
| | 23 Thank You 0:21 |
| | 24 Urge for Going 4:29 |

DAVE VAN ROK ...and the tin pan bended and the story ended...

