

**dave
van
ronk**

accompanying himself on guitar

**sings
ballads,
blues
& a
spiritual**

recorded and edited by
kenneth s. goldstein

folkways records FS 3818



FOLKWAYS FS 3818

DUNCAN AND BRADY
BLACK MOUNTAIN BLUES
IN THE PINES
MY BABY'S SO SWEET
TWELVE GATES TO THE CITY
WININ' BOY
IF YOU LEAVE ME PRETTY MOMMA
BACKWATER BLUES
CARELESS LOVE
BETTY AND DUPREE
K. C. MOAN
GAMBLER'S BLUES
JOHN HENRY
HOW LONG

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dave
van
ronk

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

FOLKWAYS FS 3818

dave van ronk sings ballads, blues & a spiritual

A NOTE FROM THE SINGER

recorded and edited by KENNETH S. GOLDSTEIN

Not infrequently I am taken to task for the manner in which I approach my material. Being of Northern white origin and stressing Southern Negro songs as I do, is, in a way, difficult to justify. I first came into contact with Negro traditional songs through a chance encounter with a recording of "Stackolee" made by Furry Lewis, a southern street-singer about whom little seems to be known. Taking it to be a form of Jazz, in which I was primarily interested and involved, I made some further investigations and discovered a whole field of music which I had not previously known existed. At this point I don't think I had ever heard a white person sing a Negro song (with the exception of my grandmother who remembered some old cakewalk and ragtime songs from the '90s) and so, having only such singers as Furry Lewis, King Solomon Hill, and Leadbelly for models, when I tried to sing these songs I naturally imitated what I heard, and if I couldn't understand a word here and there I just slurred right along with the singer. At that time, nobody listened to me anyway.

Since then I have learned that the term "folk music" encompasses more than just "blue Tail Fly" and "On Top of Old Smoky" and that there are quite a few white singers who sing the same material that I do with a very different approach from my own. Although I can appreciate the "white approach" to Negro folksongs and enjoy the work of many of its adherents, I still reserve the right to sing these songs in the style to which I am accustomed, partly because of habit, and partly, I confess, because I feel that my way is the "right way."

Dave Van Ronk

Notes by KENNETH S. GOLDSTEIN

SIDE I, Band 1: DUNCAN AND BRADY

A Negro ballad collected rather frequently throughout the South, Duncan and Brady is an excellent example of the non-static nature of Negro Balladry, for rarely do the various versions share more than one or two lines in common. This version, collected by Paul Clayton in the Southern Mountains, is especially interesting in the picture that it draws of the old and neurotic Brady, deranged by too much time on a nasty and dangerous job, ready to "shoot somebody just to see him die." Newspaper headlines all too frequently tell the same tale.

Well, it's twinkle, twinkle little star,
Along came Brady in his 'lectric car;
Got a mean look right in his eye,
Gonna shoot somebody just to see him die.
Well, he been on the job too long.

Well, Duncan, Duncan was tending the bar,
Along comes Brady with his shiney star.
Brady says, "Duncan, you are under arrest."
And Duncan shot a hole right in Brady's chest.
Yes, he been on the job too long.

Brady, Brady, Brady, well you know you done wrong,
Breaking in here when my game's going on,
Breaking down the windows, knocking down the door,
And now you're lying dead on the barroom floor.
Yes, you been on the job too long.

Well, old King Brady was a big fat man,
Doctor reached out, grabbed hold of his hand,
He felt for his pulse, Doctor said,
"I believe unto my soul King Brady's dead."
Yes, he been on the job too long.

High tailed carriages standing around,
Waiting to take King Brady to the burying ground;
High tailed carriages, rubber tired hack,
Well, they took him to the graveyard but they didn't
bring him back.
Yes, he been on the job too long.

Well, women all heard King Brady was dead,
They go back home and re-rag in red,
Come a-slipping and a-sliding and a-shuffling down
the street
In their big Mother Hubbards and their stocking feet.
He been on the job too long.

Well, Brady, Brady, well you know you done wrong
Breaking in here when my game's going on,
Breaking down the windows, knocking down the door,
And now you're lying dead on the barroom floor.
Yes, you been on the job too long.

SIDE I, Band 2: BLACK MOUNTAIN BLUES

Probably a traditional blues (several of its lines are found in various songs of known traditional origin), this song was first made popular through its being sung and recorded by the incomparable Bessie Smith (her recording of this song can be heard on Volume Two of "THE BESSIE SMITH STORY", Columbia CL 856). Its exaggerated bravado is closely related to the "half-horse, half alligator" school of frontier bragging, suggesting possible white derivation and circulation through the media of black-faced minstrel shows of the 19th century. There are various small communities in the U.S. which bear the name "Black Mountain", all of which are almost completely populated by descendants of white frontier settlers of the 18th and 19th centuries, suggesting further indication of the song's non-Negro origin.

Well, on Black Mountain, well, a child will spit
in your face,
I say on Black Mountain, well, a child will spit
in your face,
All the babies cry for whiskey, all the birds
sing bass.

Well, on Black Mountain they're as mean as they
can be,
I say on Black Mountain they're as mean as they
can be,
You know they uses gunpowder just to sweeten their
tea.

Well, on Black Mountain, well, you can't keep a
man in jail,
I say on Black Mountain, well, you can't keep a
man in jail,
Well if the jury finds him guilty, the judge will
go his bail.

I had a gal on Black Mountain, the sweetest gal in town,
I had a gal on Black Mountain, the sweetest gal in town,
Met a sweetback man and she threw me down.

I'm going back to Black Mountain, me and my razor and my gun,
I'm going back to Black Mountain, me and my razor and my gun,
I'm gonna cut her if she stands, shoot her if she runs.

SIDE I, Band 3: IN THE PINES

This song is equally well known to white and Negro singers throughout the South. Southern Mountain versions appear to be a fragment of some ballad of unrequited love; Negro versions usually tell a grisly tale of a woman widowed by a train accident in which her husband is decapitated. Both versions have an almost identical refrain. The tempo changes from singer to singer, but the tunes are almost always closely related. Van Ronk learned this version several years ago from the Kossoy sisters of New York City.

Little girl, little girl, don't lie to me,
Tell me where did you sleep last night?
In the pines, in the pines, where the sun
Well shivered the whole night through.

My daddy was a railroad man,
Killed a mile-and-a-half from here;
His head was found in the driver's wheel,
His body had never been found.

In the pines, in the pines, where the sun
never shines,
Well, shivered the whole night through.

You've caused me to weep, you've caused me to
moan,
You've caused me to lose my home.

The last words that you hear me say
Was: I want you to sing me a song.

In the pines, in the pines, where the sun
never shines,
Well shivered the whole night through.

Little girl, little girl, where'd you sleep
last night,
Not even your mother knows.
In the pines, in the pines, where the sun
never shines,
Well, shivered the whole night through.

SIDE I, Band 4: MY BABY'S SO SWEET

This is a classic eight-bar blues learned by Van Ronk from the singing of Blind Boy Fuller. Like traditional Negro blues singers throughout this country, Van Ronk finds no difficulty at all in fitting any number of extra words into a musical line when the text calls for it; see, for example, the second lines of both the third and fourth stanzas.

Hey momma, hey girl,
Well, don't you hear me calling you,
So sweet, so sweet, my sugar's so sweet.

Well, I love my baby down to her bone,
Yes, I hate to see my little sugar go home,
So sweet, so sweet, my sugar's so sweet.

If my baby she done gone home,
Well I thought I was doing her right, must have
been treating her wrong,
So sweet, so sweet, my sugar's so sweet.

If you see my baby, don't get so smart,
Well I'll cut out your liver and I'll eat your
heart,
So sweet, so sweet, my sugar's so sweet.

Yes, momma, yes, girl,
Well, don't you hear me calling you.
So sweet, so sweet, my sugar's so sweet.

Yes, momma, yes, girl,
Well, don't you hear me calling you,
So sweet, so sweet, my sugar's so sweet.

SIDE I, Band 5: TWELVE GATES TO THE CITY

This song has long been one of the favorite repertoire numbers of Negro street singers throughout America. It was frequently recorded in the early days of "race" records by Blind minstrels who were brought into the studios of leading jazz and blues record manufacturers, and this recorded 'tradition' has no doubt had its effect on the oral circulation of the song. Van Ronk first learned the song from an itinerant Negro singer-guitarist, Slim Parsons. Some of the verses recorded here were learned from the Harlem street singer, the blind Reverend Gary Davis (for a recording of Gary Davis singing this song, see "AMERICAN STREET SONGS", Riverside RLP 12-611.)

CHORUS:
Oh, what a beautiful city,
Oh, what a beautiful city,
Great God, what a beautiful city
Well, there's twelve gates to the city, hallelu.

Goin' on down to the river,
Stick my sword up in the sand,
Shout my troubles over,
I done made it to the promised land,
Well there's twelve gates to the city, hallelu.

(CHORUS)

If you see my dear old mother,
Won't you tell her please for me,
Well, meet me in the city,
Away over in Galilee.
Well there's twelve gates to the city, hallelu.

(CHORUS)

Well, there's three gates in the East,
Well, there's three gates in the West,
Three gates in the North,
Well, three gates in the South.
Well there's twelve gates to the city, hallelu.

(CHORUS)

Well, meet me, Jesus, meet me,
Won't you meet me in the middle of the air!
And if these wings should fail me,
Well, won't you meet me with another pair.
Well you know there's twelve gates to the city,
hallelu.

(CHORUS)

SIDE I, Band 6: WININ' BOY

A well known bawdy blues, Winin' Boy is sung widely by Negro singer-guitarists throughout the South. Its composition has been credited to Jelly Roll Morton, who recorded it for Alan Lomax and the Library of Congress (these recordings have been issued by Riverside Records in a twelve volume series, Riverside 9001 to 9012.), but more than likely Morton learned the song from other musicians in New Orleans.

A 'Winding Boy' is a ladies' man with a shady reputation. 'Staving Chain' was a well-known winding boy whose name has been immortalized in several Negro blues. Additional stanzas not recorded here run from simple bawdiness to outright obscenity.

I'm the winin' boy, don't deny my name,
Yes, the winin' boy, don't deny my name,

Well, the winin' boy, don't deny my name,
I can pick it up and shake it like Sweet Stavin'
Chain,
Yes, the winin' boy, don't deny my name.

Say, momma, momma, momma look at sis',
Yes, momma, momma, momma look at sis',
Well, momma, momma, take a look at sis',
Well, she out on the levee doin' a double twist,
Yes, the winin' boy, don't deny my name.

Sister, sister, dirty little sow,
Yes, sister, sister, dirty little sow,
Yes, sister, sister, little sow,
Well, you're trin' to be a bad girl and you
don't know how,
Yes, the winin' boy, don't deny my name.

M-m-m-m-m, don't deny my name,
M-m-m-m-m, don't deny my name,
Well, the winin' boy, don't deny my name,
I pick it up and shake it like sweet Stavin' Chain,
Yes, the winin' boy, don't deny my name.

SIDE I, Band 7: IF YOU LEAVE ME PRETTY MOMMA

This song is an original blues composition by Dave Van Ronk. The skill with which Van Ronk has taken over the blues, both as a singer and writer, is clearly indicated in this song, for he has utilized standard blues commonplaces or clichés with the same inspiration found in the compositions of some of the best blues composers.

If you leave me, pretty momma,
Better not treat me right,
I'll just have to forget you after tomorrow night.

If you leave me, pretty momma,
Well, better take your picture too,
I don't want to remember what a good lookin'
gal can do.

Don't write me no letter,
Well, don't send me no postcards,
Readin' 'bout you, baby, gonna make it twice
as hard.

(repeat first stanza)

Well, I'm sittin' on the Southern,
Watching the trees go by,
If my baby ain't at the depot I'm gonna lay
down and cry.

(repeat first stanza).

SIDE II, Band 1: BACKWATER BLUES

This is another of the many songs credited to Bessie Smith's authorship, and first made popular through her many performances and recording (her recording of this song can be heard on Volume IV of "THE BESSIE SMITH STORY", Columbia CL 858). Most blues are highly subjective expressions of emotion, tempered with socio-philosophical commentary. Occasionally, a somewhat consistent narrative line runs through a blues, and what results is a ballad-blues. Such a song is Backwater Blues. Apparently inspired by some flood now lost in the mystery of the past, this ballad-blues has become one of the monuments to Bessie Smith's name, and whenever other blues singers perform the number they always talk about it as "Bessie's Song", and make up a good story about how she came to write it. In all probability, the song is of folk origin, learned by Bessie from some country guitarist she heard during her early barnstorming days.

And it rained five days, and the skies turned
dark as night,
Yes it rained five days, and the skies turned
dark as night,
Yes, the trouble's takin' place in the lowland
that night

I woke up this morning, couldn't even get out
my door,

Yes, I woke up this morning, couldn't even get
out my door,
Trouble make a poor boy wonder where he want to
go.

And it thundered and lightnined, and the wind
begin to blow,
Yes, it thundered and lightnined, and the wind
begin to blow,
And a thousand people ain't got no place to go.

Well they rowed a little boat about five miles
cross the pond,
Yes, they rowed a little boat about five miles
cross the pond,
Yes, I packed my clothes, throwed them in it,
and they rowed me along.

I went and I stood on some high old lonesome hill,
You know I went and I stood on some high old
lonesome hill,
Yes, I looked on the old house where I used to live.

Yes, backwater blues has caused me to pack my
things and go,
Yes, backwater blues has caused me to pack up my
things and go,
Yes, my house fell down and I can't live there
no more.

M-m-m-m-m, I can't move no more,
M-m-m-m-m, I can't move no more,
Yes, my house washed away and I can't live there no
more.

SIDE II, Band 2: CARELESS LOVE

This is probably the most widely circulated of all folk blues, known equally well to both white and Negro singers. Many of its lines can be found in various British folksongs, but its theme is the stuff from which the best blues are shaped. Probably the most frequently recorded of all blues, it has long been a favorite with both commercial folksingers and jazz bands. The Latin rhythm which Van Ronk employs in his rendition of this piece was inspired by a recording by the Tuxedo Jazz Band of New Orleans. The text is a compilation of favorite verses from different versions heard by the singer over a period of years.

Well, it's love, oh love, oh careless love,
Well, it's love, oh love, oh careless love;
Well, you caused me to weep, you caused me to mourn,
You caused me to lose my happy home.

Well, it's sorrow, sorrow to my heart,
Well, it's sorrow, sorrow to my heart,
Sorrow, sorrow to my heart,
Since me and my true love had to part.

Well, when my apron strings did pin,
When my apron strings did pin,
Well, when my apron strings did pin,
You'd pass my door but you wouldn't come in.

I cried last night and the night before,
I cried last night and the night before,
I cried last night and the night before,
Gonna cry tonight and cry no more.

Well, it's love, oh love, oh careless love,
Well, it's love, oh love, oh careless love,
Well, you caused me to weep, you caused me to mourn,
You caused me to lose my happy home.

I wish to the Lord my train would come,
I wish to the Lord my train would come,
I wish to the Lord my train would come,
And take me back where I come from.

Well, it's love, oh love, oh careless love,
Well, it's love, oh love, oh careless love,
Well, you caused me to weep, you caused me to
mourn,
You caused me to lose my happy home.

SIDE II, Band 3: BETTY AND DUPREE

Various ballads of both white and Negro composition exist which tell the tale of Frank Dupree, a white South Carolinian who robbed an Atlanta jewelry store in 1921 and killed a policeman while making good his escape. Dupree was later captured in Detroit, was tried and convicted, and hanged on September 1, 1922. White versifications of the tale are tawdry expressions of morality, while the superior Negro versions are highly dramatic examples of folk poetry. The song has been popular with various blue singers, and was recently recorded in a rock and roll version. Van Ronk's version was learned from Jerry Levine of New York City.

Well, Betty told Dupree she want a diamond ring,
Betty told Dupree she want a diamond ring;
Well, Dupree said, Betty, for you I'd do most
anything.

Bought him a pistol, it was a forty-four,
Bought him a pistol, it was a forty-four;
To get that diamond ring for Betty, Dupree had
to rob a jewelry store.

Police caught Dupree, put him in Atlanta jail,
Police caught Dupree, put him in Atlanta jail;
Well he sent for his Betty come and go his bail.

Well, she came to see him, but his face she could
not see,
Yes, she came to see him, but his face she could
not see;
Well, said to the warden, give him this letter for me.

It said, I came to see you, but I could not see your
face,
Yes, I came to see you, but I could not see your
face;
I just want to tell you nobody's gonna take your
place.

SIDE II, Band 4: K.C. MOAN

Although the title is the same as that of a widely known traditional blues, this song bears only a passing resemblance to it. Actually it is a "composed" blues, put together by Van Ronk from several traditional blues pieces as a vehicle for some virtuous guitar work.

I hate to hear that K.C. when she moan,
Yes, I hate to hear that K.C. when she moan;
Yes, she moans like my woman when she's cryin'.

Well that K.C. coming, coming down the road,
Well that K.C. coming, carrying a heavy load;
Well, there's hard times here, children, harder
on down the road.

Well the longest train a hundred coaches long,
Yes, the longest train a hundred coaches long,
Well the girl I love is on that train and gone.

Let me be your side track til your main line comes,
Let me be your side track til your main line comes;
Yes, I'll do more switching than your main line
ever done.

SIDE II, Band 5: GAMBLER'S BLUES

The melody was different and so was the setting, but this song was sung in Ireland over 150 years ago. Then it was known as The Unfortunate Rake, and it told the story of a young man who died of too much high living...and some venereal disease. The song eventually travelled across the ocean and became known in various versions as The Bad Girl's Lament, The Streets of Laredo, The Lineman's Hymn, The Wild Lumberjack and was parodied many times more by occupational groups, students, and union pickets. Sometime around the turn of the century, a blues singer in a honky-tonk nitespot started singing and it came out as the Gambler's Blues. It's been a standard blues and jazz band piece ever since.

It was down by old Joe's barroom,
On the corner by the square;
They were serving drinks as usual
And the usual crowd was there.

On my left stood Big Joe McKennedy,
His eyes were bloodshot red;
He turned to the crowd around him,
These were the very words he said:

I went down to that St. James Infirmary,
Saw my baby there,
Stretched out on a long white table,
So sweet, so cold, so fair.

Let her go, let her go, God bless her,
Wherever she may be;
She may search this wide world over,
Never find a sweet man like me.

When I die please bury me
In my high topped Stetson hat,
Put a twenty dollar gold piece on my watch chain,
So God will know I died standing pat.

I want six crap shooters for pall bearers,
A chorus girl to sing me a song;
Put a jazz band on my hearse wagon,
Raise hell as I stroll along.

Let her go, let her go, God bless her,
Wherever she may be;
She may search this wide world over,
Never find a sweet man like me.

Well, now that I've told my story,
Well, I'll take another shot of booze,
And if anyone should ask you,
Well, I've got those gambler's blues.

SIDE II, Band 6: JOHN HENRY

This is one of the most widely dispersed of all Negro ballad creations, and certainly one of the finest of native American ballads. The legend of the great Negro steel driver is believed to have arisen from the building of the Big Bend tunnel in West Virginia in 1870-1872. No documentary evidence of a John Henry having actually existed has ever been uncovered, though the song has been subjected to extensive study, including two long monographs, and any number of shorter investigative pieces. Such problems never bother the singers from whom the ballad has been collected, for to the folk Negro of the South John Henry was a symbol of tremendous magnitude. There is no mistaking the identification of the traditional singer and his audience with the heroic proportions of the giant steel-driver, for he is, as John Greenway has aptly described him, "...the apotheosis of their own unrealized potentialities....a Negro who beat the white man at his own game." For this recording Van Ronk has tuned his guitar in C, as follows: E C G C G C, a tuning learned from Dick Rosmini of New York, who learned it from Blind Gary Davis.

John Henry was a little baby,
Sitting down on his mammy's knee;
Well, that Big Bend tunnel on the C & O road
Is gonna be the death of me,
It is gonna be the death of me.

Well, the captain he said to John Henry,
Gonna bring that steam drill around,
Gonna put that steam drill out on the job,
Whup that steel on down,
Whup that steel on down.

Well, John Henry said to his captain,
Well, a man ain't nothing but a man.
Well, before I'll see that steam drill beat me down,
I'll die with my hammer in my hand,
I'll die with my hammer in my hand.

Well, oh John Henry, oh John Henry,
Well, the blood am running red,
Well, before I die with this hammer in my hand,
I beat him to the bottom but I'm dead,
I beat him to the bottom but I'm dead.

SIDE II, Band 7: HOW LONG

This "classic" blues was composed by Leroy Carr in 1929, and has since become such a favorite with blues singers that it frequently has been recorded without a proper credit line; as often as not it is referred to as the work of those two prolific song-writers, ANON. and TRAD. Van Ronk learned it from Jimmy Rushing in New York City. The guitar work is based on the piano version of How Long recorded by Jimmy Yancey. Rushing has recorded the song for Vanguard Records, VRS 8518. Yancey's recording can be heard in the Folkways Jazz Series, Volume II, FJ 2602.

How long, how long,
Has that evening train been gone?
How long, how long, baby, how long?

Heard the whistle blowing, couldn't see no train;
Down in my heart I felt an aching pain.
How long, how long, baby, how long?

If I could holler like a mountain cat,
I'd climb this mountain, call my baby back.
How long, how long, baby, how long?

Feel so disgusted, I feel so blue,
Don't know what in the world I'm gonna do.
How long, how long, babe, how long?