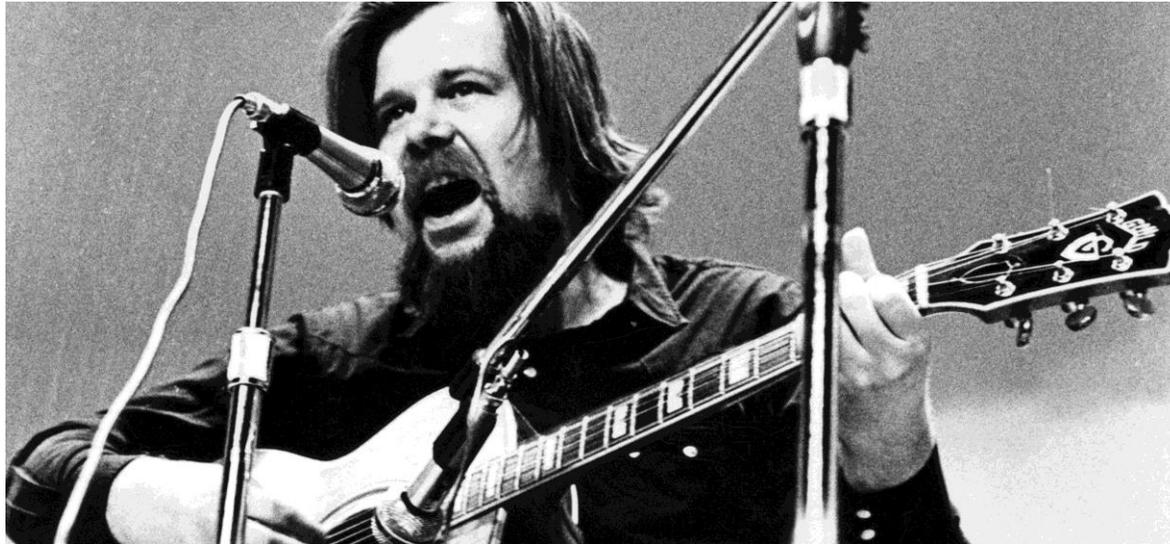


DAVE VAN RONK



| <i>Recording years</i> | <i>Main genre</i> | <i>Music sample</i> |
|------------------------|-------------------|--|
| <i>1958-2001</i> | <i>Folk</i> | <i><u>Oh, What A Beautiful City (1959)</u></i> |

Only Solitaire

Artist: *Dave Van Ronk*

Years: *1958-1961*

George Starostin's Reviews

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SINGS BALLADS, BLUES, AND A SPIRITUAL

Album released:

May 1959

V A L U E
2 4 3 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Duncan And Brady; 2) Black Mountain Blues; 3) In The Pines; 4) My Baby's So Sweet; 5) Twelve Gates To The City; 6) Winin' Boy; 7) If You Leave Me Pretty Momma; 8) Backwater Blues; 9) Careless Love; 10) Betty And Dupree; 11) K. C. Moan; 12) Gambler's Blues; 13) John Henry; 14) How Long.

REVIEW

Like (probably) most people of my own and following generations, I first came across the quirky name «Dave Van Ronk» while reading a Bob Dylan biography — just a couple years before a small window of opportunity opened up for old Dave in 2004 (with Dylan himself publishing *Chronicles Vol. 1*, in which he wrote a bit about his Greenwich Village mentors) and then reached its peak with the Coen Bros.' release of *Inside Llewyn Davis*, loosely based on Van Ronk's life story. Van Ronk himself never got to enjoy this brief popularity resurgence, having passed away in 2002, and while it did briefly dust off some memories, it is probably safe to say that, just like



Odetta and many other talented performers from the golden years of American folk revival, Van Ronk will forever be ensconced as an auxiliary figure, an important historical medium in the transition from Leadbelly to Bob Dylan and nothing more. He may be «Mayor of MacDougal Street», but whoever remembers all those lists of mayors, anyway?

While contemplating oblivion is always a little sad, it only takes one listen to Van Ronk's debut album for Folkways Records to admit that in this case, oblivion is at least understandable, if not entirely justified. Dave Van Ronk was a passionate and gifted musician and performer, but he was also a humble soul — and while humility is king when it comes to general human

beings, in case of artists it really places them at a disadvantage. Already on his first album, recorded after several years of practice and musical growth, Dave Van Ronk comes across as a skilled guitar player and an efficient singer with a unique (for his time, at least) vocal tone — but he writes none of his songs, and does his best to let you understand that the ones that he covers are being *transmitted* by him to the general public, rather than reinterpreted for a modern age.

Like most of his Greenwich Village peers, Van Ronk's chief inspiration came from the old recordings of the 1920s and early Depression-era 1930s — the track list on this album specifically indicates Leadbelly, Reverend Gary Davis, and Bessie Smith as the key figures inspiring the young Irish performer. His acoustic guitar playing is not intended to specifically imitate the style of any of the pre-war folk-blues greats — it owes a lot to the techniques of Mississippi John Hurt and Gary Davis, but, as a rule, merges them all in Dave's own technique: nicely syncopated, clean, steady, precise, unhurrying, pleasant, but not terribly exciting. If there is one thing that separates his playing from the likes of all those guys, as well as Big Bill Broonzy and whatever other authentic acoustic-blues black performers were still playing the revival circuits in the 1950s, it is the total lack of «flash» and «showmanship»: throughout the album, the man's hands remain calm as a cucumber, as if playing guitar for him was like steering a ship through the reefs (he did spend time in the Merchant Marine, after all, before settling on the role of folk music artist).

This might seem a bit weird next to all those pictures of Van Ronk's dishevelled appearance and poetic descriptions such as Robert Shelton's likening him to "*an unmade bed strewn with books, record jackets, pipes, empty whiskey bottles, lines from obscure poets, finger picks, and broken guitar strings*", but appearances can be deceiving. Van Ronk may have looked like an early prototype of Captain Beefheart, and he may even have had a voice that could sound like an early prototype of Captain Beefheart, but unlike Captain Beefheart, he seems to have generally been a sane, rational, «normal» person, just one with relatively little use for certain basic social conventions of American white society at the time (such as a primal hatred for «socialism», whatever that term could mean for anybody). And more than anything, that type of sanity is well reflected in his music — all these covers sound professional, sincere, imbued with feeling, and... just a tad boring.

The key element here, in 1959, was not so much Van Ronk's guitar playing as his voice. Gruff, nasal, croaky, yet at the same time highly melodic, it was the most «earthy» Greenwich Village could ever get — Pete Seeger and the entire Kingston Trio sounded like Toddlerville next to this guy with his howling and wheezing. Of course, in his own turn Van Ronk would sound like a toddler next to the likes of Blind Willie Johnson or Charley Patton; but in 1959, Blind Willie Johnson and Charley Patton were dead, and those of their African-American peers who were still alive and vocally comparable did not bother to

set up residence in Greenwich Village (though a few younger people did, like Odetta). To many in New York City, Dave Van Ronk was as close as you could get to actually hearing the true spirit of these old songs — including Dylan, whose vocal style on his early acoustic records is very much influenced by Van Ronk, at least through the very idea that you don't necessarily have to have a «pretty» voice to be a folk singer.

In retrospect, however, it is difficult not to acknowledge that an album like this was far more important at a certain place and in a certain time than it ever could be anywhere and anytime else. While all the recordings sound pleasant on their own, I made an effort to specifically play some of them back-to-back with the earlier tracks they were based on, and in almost every case, Van Ronk... well, not so much «loses» to the original, but rather just fails to demonstrate what makes his own interpretation worth being treasured separately. Thus, the lone «spiritual» of this album — 'Oh, What A Beautiful City' — follows the classic Rev. Gary Davis recording from 1935, which is more engaging musically (reflecting Davis' «piano-like» style of playing the guitar) and more moving vocally; Van Ronk drastically simplifies the melody and leaves the religious ecstasy of the Reverend's performance without, so it seems to me, managing to preserve the pain and suffering reflected in the performance. The latter choice may have been conscious, because for Dave, sincerity and honesty was key, and he could not imitate what he did not feel himself; but this, of course, ends up somewhat eviscerating the purpose of the song.

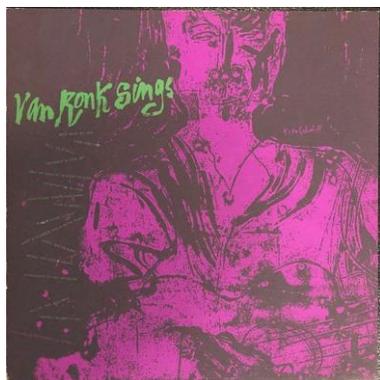
The same goes for 'Gambler's Blues', otherwise known as 'St. James' Infirmary', a song that has been covered by just about anybody in the business, but very rarely done just right. Of all the versions I know, Van Ronk's stands closest to Jimmie Rodgers' cover from 1932, and while Jimmie's voice was never as «earthy» as Dave's, his soft, trembling, quasi-weeping high pitch delivery emphasized the tragedy of the song's lyrics far sharper than Van Ronk's performance. It is almost ironic, since Rodgers' vocalization is more theatrical and manneristic, while Dave tries hard to imitate the realistic grittiness of a wasted barroom client — yet there is something here that makes me want to give poor Jimmie a hug, while at the same time moving my chair away from Van Ronk's spot, just for safety reasons.

Perhaps the only one of those old performers against whom Dave can more or less hold his own is Leadbelly. Unlike Gary Davis or Mississippi John Hurt, Leadbelly was not a great or particularly idiosyncratic guitar player, and his singing was more like an entertaining storyteller's than a passionate artist's, which gives Dave a chance to steal away a song or two from Huddie Ledbetter's vast repertoire. His 'John Henry', for instance, is delivered with more playing and singing frenzy than Leadbelly ever thought necessary for the song, which is fairly consistent with the song's traditional narrative of Man Vs. Machine; more importantly, both Leadbelly and Big Bill Broonzy sing the song rather playfully, with the tragedy implied by

the narrative rather than conveyed by the singing and playing, whereas Dave goes about it bluntly and openly. Likewise, his rendition of the creepy ballad 'In The Pines' (a.k.a. 'Where Did You Sleep Last Night?') is, at least on the surface, more lyrical and caring than Leadbelly's — although cynical tongues might add that he is just doing that to make the material more palatable for his white audiences. But then again, what alternatives could one really have in the middle of Greenwich Village? Move to the Delta?

All in all, I won't lie and pretend that the album holds that much more than just historical significance for me. But it *is* pleasant to listen to if you are into folk-blues music at all, and it *is* interesting to compare these interpretations with the sources, just to see the evolution of the material from rowdy pre-war African-American context to rowdy post-war white socialist college student context in that brief time window *before* it either got commercialized à la Peter, Paul & Mary model or evolved into something completely different, like Bob Dylan or Phil Ochs. I dare say, though, that reading Dave Van Ronk's autobiography (*The Mayor Of MacDougal Street*) is probably a more fascinating way to plunge yourself into the reality of those epochal times than just listening to his music.





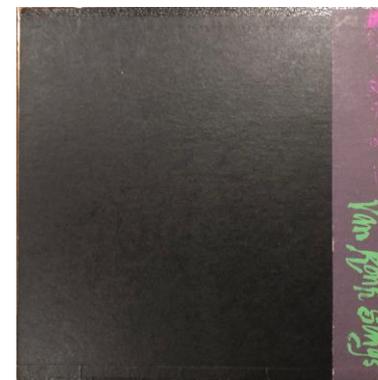
VAN RONK SINGS

Album released:

July 1961

V A L U E
2 3 2 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Bed Bug Blues; 2) Yas-Yas-Yas; 3) Please See That My Grave Is Kept Clean; 4) Tell Old Bill; 5) Georgie And The IRT; 6) Hesitation Blues; 7) Hootchy Kootchy Man; 8) Sweet Substitute; 9) Dink's Song; 10) River Come Down; 11) Just A Closer Walk With Thee; 12) Come Back Baby; 13) Spike Driver's Moan; 14) Standing By My Window; 15) Willie The Weeper.

REVIEW

Dave's second full-length album for Folkways (re-released several years later as **Dave Van Ronk Sings The Blues**, perhaps to emphasize the fact that there are no «ballads» or «spirituals» this time) changes very little about the formula established on his first one, so coming up with any additional generalizations would be quite a chore. It does not expand on Van Ronk's stylistic, philosophical, or vocal range, and his acoustic guitar playing is even less interesting here than it used to be. Switching back and forth between the two records, I can only notice that this one tends to be slightly less reverential and a tad more humorous: for instance, the first LP had no bona fide «joke blues» numbers such as 'Yas-Yas-Yas', a «hokum» dance-blues tune that Dave allegedly snatched from a recording by Blind Blake & The Royal Victoria Hotel Calypsos made in 1951 (note: this is a *different* Blind Blake from the classic virtuoso blues guitarist Blind Blake who died in 1934) — "*Mama bought a chicken / She thought it was a duck / Put it on the table with its legs sticking up...*" (Not-so-insignificant trivia bit: here be another small link between Dave Van Ronk and Captain Beefheart, who would later make lyrical references to 'Yas-Yas-Yas' in his own 'Old Fart At Play' on **Trout Mask Replica**). Occasional touches like these make the atmosphere lighter and, in a way, more authentic, but whether it's an objective plus remains unclear.



We continue, of course, to see just how strong Dave's influence was on Dylan, who would record his own version of Blind Lemon Jefferson's 'Please See That My Grave Is Kept Clean' on his debut album — largely following in the steps of Van Ronk rather than Blind Lemon himself. There, however, lies the rub, as you can easily witness yourself if you line up all three versions and listen to them in chronological succession. What Van Ronk does, basically, is just cover Blind Lemon: he plays a similar guitar pattern, uses the same types of vocal modulation and strives to replicate the original atmosphere. At the time, this was regarded as a virtue: rough, unadorned guitar playing and a creaky, croaky, earthy voice as opposed to the stereotypical «angelization» of old folk and blues by the average white performer in Greenwich Village, not to mention the fact that original recordings by Blind Lemon were not always easily accessible even to those who did hunt for them, let alone the casual listener who would only scoop up whatever was at hand — like a brand new Dave Van Ronk LP from the Folkways label in your nearby record store.

Today, though, when time has flattened and nivelated the historical difference between 1928 and 1961, the historical relevance of Blind Lemon Jefferson has remained stable, while that of Van Ronk's covers of his material has quite sorely decreased. Dave struggles to soak in the spirit of the original Delta performer, doing good, but not great; the genius of Dylan was in that he'd only used that spirit as a base influence, injecting it with his own brand of adrenaline, taking the idea of «you can sing in a weird voice and play weird guitar, like the black dudes did before the war» but effectively leaving out the second part, because, well, a white dude can hardly play and sing like a black dude anyway... well, maybe a white dude like Dave Van Ronk could have some knack for that, but certainly not a white dude like Bobbie Zimmerman. Certainly you can feel Van Ronk riding the same vibe as Blind Lemon, cherishing and respecting the original feels, yet it is difficult to get rid of the sensation that the general idea was something like «well, here's a dusted-off oldie for the kids of today who can finally listen to it without all those annoying crackles, hisses, and pops».

Van Ronk's artistic strength is felt much better on those numbers which do *not* have a classic Delta-style prototype; a classic example here is 'Dink's Song', a.k.a. 'Fare Thee Well (My Honey)', whose origins stretch even further back than 'See That My Grave Is Kept Clean' (it was allegedly first recorded by John Lomax in 1904 from a woman called 'Dink' in a Texas work camp, although the recording does not seem to have survived). After the song was published, it had been officially recorded by a number of performers — Josh White, Harry Belafonte, Pete Seeger — but mostly with a jazzy or an «angelic-folk» vibe, so Van Ronk's interpretation, with the man singing at the top range of his croaky voice, gave the tune lots of extra power and soul, becoming the definitive version and one of Van Ronk's signature performances (no wonder Oscar Isaac [gets to sing a good two minutes of it](#) for his impersonation of Van Ronk in *Inside Llewyn Davis*). Although both melodically and

lyrically, 'Dink's Song' is just as much a classic blues number as anything else, it also has certain overtones going back to medieval ballads (even the refrain of "*fare thee well my honey, fare thee well*" hardly has any African-American linguistic properties), and Van Ronk is the perfect guy to roughen and toughen up this mix of sources, especially when compared to, for instance, the first commercial performance of the song by [Libby Holman](#).

Funny enough, Dylan covered 'Dink's Song', too — you can hear a five-minute long version from the «Minnesota Hotel Tape» on the **No Direction Home** soundtrack — and he also tried to give the tune a different vibe, playing a much more energetic, almost danceable guitar pattern and injecting a bit of the usual Dylan irony and grumpiness in the vocal performance (note, too, how he displaces the accent from Van Ronk's "*fare thee welllllllll...*" onto "*fare thee weeeeeeeell...*", which makes the refrain a bit more «cackling» than «desperate»). However, in this case I think that Dylan's version does not work: Van Ronk stays true to the song's bitter message of abandonment and deceit, while Bob tries to push it into the realm of the cynical, and fails — to do that properly, he'd need to start writing his own lyrics. Small wonder, then, that 'Dink's Song' did not ultimately make it into Bob's regular repertoire.

Unfortunately, there are many more numbers similar in their relative uselessness to 'See That My Grave Is Kept Clean' on **Van Ronk Sings**, than tracks similar in their usefulness to 'Dink's Song'. Try as he might, Dave cannot generate the same menace as Muddy Waters on his cover of 'Hoochie Coochie Man' (even when throwing on an extra verse from 'I'm Ready' for good measure), or outperform Sister Rosetta Tharpe on 'Just A Closer Walk With Thee', or make slow blues numbers like 'Come Back Baby' as engaging as Ray Charles. All of that stuff is decent enough to be heard on a nice, relaxing summer evening in your local coffee shop, but that's about it. You know something's not quite right when the song that draws your attention the most is a hilarious vaudeville number about an addicted chimney sweeper ('Willie The Weeper', featuring one of the seventy million different sets of lyrics about Willie's adventures in the sweet world of opiates), just because it's fast, jumpy, aggressive, and featuring the singer at his most guttural and «all-out there».

It might have worked out better if Dave cared to imbue more of that «modern sensitivity» into the recordings, but the only number that actually does that is the black humor-tinged 'Georgie And The IRT', a straightforward parody on The Carter Family's '[Engine 143](#)' co-written by Dave with his friend Lawrence Block, a fairly special guy who used various pseudonyms to write naughty erotic novels about the covert sides of life in Greenwich Village ("[Anita was a virgin — till the hipsters got hold of her!](#)"). Dave and Lawrence's parody updates the original setting of the song, about an unfortunate engineer who ran his train into the rocks back in 1890, to modern times, with the appropriate lyrical changes from "*The very last words poor*

Georgie said was nearer, my God, to Thee" to "*The very last words that Georgie said were 'Screw the IRT!'*" as the protagonist now has to die in a hilarious accident caused by peak hour pressure. Granted, the song, which Dave here performs as a duet with the somewhat notorious 12-string guitarist Dick Rosmini, is nothing but a joke, but it's a pretty damn funny joke for the times, not to mention the historical interest (who even remembers, in this day and age, the Interborough Rapid Transit as the original designation of one of New York's private subway operators?).

Irreverence and humor are indeed a bit of a saving grace for the record, from the old-timey approach on 'Yas-Yas-Yas' to the contemporary update on 'Georgie', but modernization of tradition rarely rests upon humor alone — and if it did for Dave, he'd turn into a vaudeville act, which was hardly a coveted goal — yet we still don't really see Van Ronk predicting the rise of even Phil Ochs, let alone Bob Dylan. To me, about half of the album, particularly when Dave is singing straightforward 12-bar blues, is flat-out boring; the other half, ranging from a tiny bunch of soulful highlights like 'Dink's Song' to the joke numbers, is what might be called «promising», but still not exactly breathtaking. One might even regard this as a bit of the proverbial «sophomore slump», given that Dave's mission and image had been firmly established on the first record, and this one offers relatively few advances from it; but it's difficult in general to analyze Van Ronk's career in terms of highs and lows, since the man always kept his ambitiousness in check, never striving to be a star and never pretending that he himself really had a lot more to say that hadn't already been said before. Ah, if this kind of humility were considered top virtue in the world of popular music... she'd be my Grandpa, I guess.

