I Belong to the Band: The Music of Reverend Gary Davis

William Lee Ellis
To the University Council:

The Dissertation Committee for William Lee Ellis certifies that this is the final approved version of the following electronic dissertation: “I Belong to the Band: The Music of Reverend Gary Davis.”

_________________________
David Evans, Ph.D.
Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

__________________  
Carol Crown, Ph.D.

__________________  
Kenneth Kreitner, Ph.D.

__________________  
Janet Page, Ph.D.

__________________  
Charles Williams, Ph.D.

Accepted for the Graduate Council:

_____________________
Karen D. Weddle-West, Ph.D.
Vice Provost for Graduate Programs
I BELONG TO THE BAND:  
THE MUSIC OF REVEREND GARY DAVIS  

by  

William Lee Ellis  

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ABSTRACT


“I Belong to the Band” is the first extensive analytical examination of the music of guitarist/singer Reverend Gary Davis (1896-1972), whose vast repertoire and instrumental virtuosity made him a favorite performer and teacher during the folk and blues revival. Discussed in detail are his songs and aspects of musical technique as well as larger issues such as appropriation in traditional song, the interplay of sacred and secular content and style in African American song, the role(s) of blindness in musical culture, and contrastive and associative symmetries in blues performances. To better glean Davis’s music and the world in which he lived, numerous methodologies were called on including the use of musicological, structuralist, and Jungian interpretative models, textual linguistics in my examination of visual and violent imagery and inference in Davis’s songs, and contextual and biographical analysis. This dissertation also contains the most complete and accurate discography of Davis to date, plus analysis and classification of songs and performances through a number of data-driven as well as hermeneutic approaches including key choice, sacred or secular content, stanzaic structures, and lyric tropes. In the process, I have debunked certain well-established generalizations about Davis, pointing out the extent to which he cultivated a secular repertoire later in his life despite frequent claims by writers that he did not, and I have shown the overreaching influence blindness had on his music and his life. At the same time, this examination of a “folk” figure suggests avenues of research beyond typical
folkloric and biographic models, notably through a kind of musicological rigor rarely applied to the performances of such artists. Much can still be culled from this rich swath of musical history simply by revisiting the songs themselves with a more pointed, analytical pen. Ultimately, “I Belong to the Band” demonstrates how one traditional musician forged a highly personalized style from layers of “belonging” and foundation building, from his rural Carolina and African American regional and cultural roots to the rootless solidarity of the Piedmont blues scene to his Christian faith and its expression through gospel music and finally to the “discipleship” he engendered in others who continue to perform his music.
“He had a way of entertaining God and a way of entertaining the people.”

– Tiny Robinson
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ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations generally conform to those outlined in Blues & Gospel Records\(^1\) with some additions of my own. Other abbreviations are explained as needed within the text.

banjo bj
bones bns
capo c
guitar g
harmonica h
instrumental instr.
kazoo k
piano p
played with a slide w/s
vocal quartet qt
vocal quintet qn
vocal v
washboard wb
xylophone x

CHAPTER I

“LO, I’LL BE WITH YOU ALWAYS”: STUDYING THE MUSIC AND LIFE OF REVEREND GARY DAVIS

The obituary that ran in the New York Times on May 8, 1972, was titled “Rev. Gary Davis, 76, Blind Gospel Singer.” No photograph accompanied the single-column, thirty-four-line item, which was placed under the lead obituary of a Staten Island councilman.¹ In the brief mention, Davis’s skills as a musician were summed up as “rhythmic gospel music with a blues foundation,” a valuation that persists to this day.

Yet as the following pages will show, the South Carolina-born African American singer and multi-instrumentalist was not the so-called “holy bluesman” that his many fans thought, wanted, or marketed him to be. Remove his songs from the various contexts of his life, and yes, “holy blues” becomes an easy sound bite for someone so complex in character and talent. Various factors helped to perpetuate such a label, none more so than the era and audience through which his reputation spread. The term “holy blues” caught on in the early 1960s with the ascent of Davis’s commercial musical career via the folk and blues revival.² For acoustic blues fans (who have historically constituted the largest


²The categorizing of Davis as a “holy bluesman” first appeared in print in a Robert Shelton review for the New York Times (“Dream of Newport Folk Festival,” New York Times, 19 July 1964, arts x11) and has continued unabated ever since both from a marketing and interpretive angle. Witness such recent product as the 2001 Gary Davis boxed set, Demons and Angels: The Ultimate Collection (Shanachie 6117), with a title that exploits, one could argue, the dichotomous nature of Davis’s music; or an instructional book from the same year, Holy Blues of Rev. Gary Davis (Pacific, Mo.: Mel Bay Publications and Stefan Grossman’s Guitar Workshop), which offers six religious numbers that are hardly the byproduct of blues. The more cynical have even considered “holy blues” something of a ploy, and while some musicians might have exploited both sides of the musical and philosophical spectrum for gain, we have to keep in mind that such a definition was imposed from the outside and is best understood from that historical context. In the 1960s, Milton Okun, for example, referred to Davis’s music as “holy blues,” but felt that bluesmen, of which he thought Davis was one, were in essence fooling the religious world by switching out words to previously secular music – what he called a “compromise form.” Needless to say, this critique showed little
listening base for Davis’s music), blues objectified as something “holy” became far more appealing than any overt Christian message, which was the content of most of Davis’s material; calling Davis’s music “holy blues,” it would seem, gave his many secular fans a way to appreciate Davis’s masterly guitar playing without necessarily buying into his religious ideology. That he also sang about cocaine, “candy men,” and wanting to “tear that building down” – a topically rich and resonant metaphor for the Civil Rights era – didn’t hurt either.

True, his songs were a mingling of many sources – secular and sacred alike – in the creation of a style at once earthy and transcendent. Yet, that made him no less reverent a singer than, say, Arizona Dranes, whose bluesy, ragtime-energized piano playing only heightened the religious fervor of her fellow Church of God in Christ congregants. Like the musical virtuosos who populated the sanctified/holiness faiths at the turn of the twentieth century, Davis’s secular-informed abilities on his instrument became an extension of his spiritual worldview, one that allowed him to pick a string band or rag number when called upon.

Related to that idea, this paper will dispel another oft-repeated misunderstanding about Davis, i.e., that he gave up his “sinful” material once he became a Baptist minister in the 1930s. A detailed examination of Davis’s vast repertoire shows just the contrary. Not only did he retain many secular tunes later in life, he did so in a much more extreme way than commonly thought. That said, Davis was foremost a minister whose love of God flowed from his fingers at every musical turn, and failure to appreciate him on his own terms misses the point of who he fundamentally was.

understanding of the complexities and musical interchange within African American vernacular music, let alone Davis’s own standing within that musical heritage. See Milton Okun, Something to Sing About! The Personal Choices of America’s Folk Singers (New York: Macmillan Company, 1968), 50.
As lacking in depth as the New York Times obituary was, it did get one thing right: the headline. Given prominence in that short amount of space were three factors that heavily informed Davis throughout his life, his blindness, his Christian faith, and his music. Add his African American cultural heritage, and Davis found what he needed to construct a sense of self that rose from the extreme poverty, racism, violence, and overall harshness of life granted him as a child emerging out of the post-Reconstruction American South. Davis was hardly alone in his ability to claim life-affirming identity through the power of faith and/or music; that has been one of the great leitmotifs of black America. How he was able to do it with the added marginalization of his physical disability is a remarkable story in its own right. A recent examination of the Great Migration has argued that, in most respects other than economic prosperity, it was a tremendous success for African Americans in terms of cultural, political, and social progress. How great then was Davis’s own personal saga, coming as he did from the South to resettle in the urban North where he found opportunity and fame, and became a father figure to generations of future musicians?

The following dissertation – “I Belong to the Band: The Music of Reverend Gary Davis” – is the first comprehensive, analytical treatment of Reverend Gary Davis the musician. At the same time, it contributes toward the relatively small yet growing number of biographical texts on musical figures in the pre-World War II blues or gospel fields. This paper will demonstrate how music became for Davis a frame into which all aspects of his identity could be contained and embraced, transforming someone who might have otherwise been relegated to the impoverished life of an anonymous street musician and

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preacher, which Davis had largely been well into his 50s. Central to this paper is the first full repertory study ever given to Davis, whose music was more richly defined than the blues/gospel dichotomy it usually receives. To that end, I have given his songs and performances a rigorous musicological analysis rarely attempted in traditional American music, where most study comes under the aegis of folkloric, biographical, and/or literary appreciation. I have examined at length 846 sound and video performances by Davis including 159 unissued recordings (not to mention hundreds of recordings by his gospel and blues peers), and with these known recordings and repertoire as a baseline, I have been able to establish some fundamental observations about Davis and his compositional process, use of variation, key and tuning predilection, song structure, right and left hand technique, singing style, comparative analysis against other musicians, and his multi-instrumental abilities aside from the guitar. In addition, I have compiled more than twenty appendices that give empirical weight to my conclusions, including: a) a systematic dissection of his known repertoire in terms of its sacred/secular split, keys, and blues material, none of which has been done before; b) a revised sessionography and discography that correct many past assumptions and errors; and c) comparative charts of nearly five hundred recordings by Davis’s Piedmont blues and guitar evangelist contemporaries. Among the interpretative models I have embraced are structuralist theory and Jungian symbology as they may relate to reconciliation and meaning in the music of Davis, and the writings of Italian blues scholar Luigi Monge in both the area of textual linguistics and application of visual references in the music of blind singers. In this

introductory chapter, I provide an overview of writings and research on Davis and similar musical figures, and I outline my sources and methodology, including approaches I have taken toward transcription and lyrical analysis. The rest of the chapters are as follows:

Chapter II: This biographical sketch consolidates what we know of Davis while adding some new data courtesy of my own research plus a reexamination of published and unpublished interviews, census data, historical sources including newspaper accounts, school, and welfare records, and various ephemera including letters written by his wife Annie Davis. A proper biography, which Davis also deserves, is not the intent of this dissertation in what is a music-focused examination of the guitarist/singer.

Chapter III: In the paper’s longest chapter, technical and stylistic aspects of Davis’s playing and music are explored, from right- and left-hand approaches to the guitar and key/chord shape preference to the levels of variation Davis applied to his music. Issues include the specter of lynching and Jim Crow discrimination in Davis’s music, and how mythic connections can be read into his repertoire, specifically the slide guitar number, “Whistlin’ Blues.” This chapter also measures Davis against the musical context of his pre-war Piedmont blues and guitar evangelist contemporaries, proving in a data-driven manner that Davis was truly different from his peers.

Chapter IV: Issues that pertain to the study of traditional musicians’ repertoires are discussed here, as is Davis’s religious music, specifically his variety of lyrical forms, messaging, and the central role “Samson and Delilah” played in his professional musical life.

Chapter V: Davis’s non-blues secular guitar music is detailed, with emphasis
given to the troping of source material in distinctive performances that merged traditional
and popular song. Detailed analyses of signature songs such as “Maple Leaf Rag” and
“Soldier’s Drill” are included.

Chapter VI: As this chapter will show, Davis’s relationship with the blues was at
once overstated and integral to the whole of his musicianship. The conflicted/connected
nature of blues and religion in African American culture of the South is addressed, and
key songs such as “Cocaine Blues” and “Delia” are explored in depth with special weight
given to symmetrical structures in Davis’s blues lyrics.

Chapter VII: Davis also played the banjo, harmonica, and piano. In looking at this
side of his musicality, we get a better window onto his turn-of-the-century string band
roots and, in the case of the piano, his accomplished sense of harmony on the guitar.

Chapter VIII: In many ways, blindness was Davis’s constant companion, shaping
his life and music in fundamental ways. Building on Luigi Monge’s work, I have offered
the first in-depth lyrical analysis of Davis’s songs and what it intimates about his
blindness. An overview of blindness in world cultures is also given in an effort to better
understand and appreciate Davis and the great body of blind African American songsters
within the context of human musical endeavor.

Chapter IX: wherein I summarize my findings and make recommendations for
further research.

The total resulting portrait will show Davis to have been a singular figure in the
larger framework of African American and American traditional music, someone whose
unique set of skills and circumstance allowed him to straddle both sides of the sacred-
secular fence – the East Coast blues camp on the one hand, and the guitar evangelical camp on the other – without entirely adhering (on a musical level, at least) to either. Through his music, Davis also transcended the great divide of racial struggle on his own terms. He might not have been a central voice within the Civil Rights movement, but his life, as this paper will show, was a model of black pride and individual genius; his music, a moral compass bound by the collective memory of a people who sang their way to freedom.

For many, Davis’s legacy resides in his fingertips. So impressive was his command of the guitar fretboard, that he has been judged a pivotal figure in the annals of East Coast pre-war blues despite his having played very little of this musical form. “You could almost say that Davis was the greatest blues guitarist never to play blues,” wryly observed roots music scholar Tony Russell. ⁵ Accolades have mounted in the years since his death, a reputation built for the most part around his frequently stunning technique. Davis was someone whose “guitar virtuosity was legendary,” ⁶ and who made “gospel and the blues seem like perfect partners.” ⁷ His music constitutes “one of our finest recorded legacies of Afro-American religious music,” ⁸ and “his importance in the history of black

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rural music cannot be overestimated.” To others, he was “undeniably one of the best guitar players in music history.”

Because of his guitar prowess, he became a mentor and teacher to generations of guitarists, from Piedmont pre-war peers such as Blind Boy Fuller to a who’s-who of later folk, blues, and rock legends. Davis is estimated to have personally taught more than a hundred guitarists in his lifetime. In the long list of those who studied with (or simply studied) Davis are Bob Dylan, Dave Van Ronk, Taj Mahal, Eric Von Schmidt, Roy Book Binder, Jorma Kaukonen, Dion, Donovan, Ry Cooder, David Bromberg, Stefan Grossman, Woody Mann, Larry Johnson, John Cephas, Tarheel Slim, and Bob Weir. It could be argued that the soundtrack of the 1960s and 1970s folk and rock scenes would have been decidedly different were it not for the lessons many of its participants took from the Harlem minister who befriended each and every one. This thought is amplified when we consider the many artists who recorded songs associated with Davis; such performers include Peter, Paul, and Mary, Bobby Darin, the Staple Singers, and the Grateful Dead (who all did versions of “Samson and Delilah”), Dave Van Ronk and Jackson Browne (“Cocaine”), and Bob Dylan (“Baby Let Me Follow You Down”). Because of his many protégés, Davis was able to advance a way of playing the steel-string acoustic guitar that departed freely from the technical boundaries and typical language established in both guitar blues and religious guitar of the pre-war era. On a


technical level, he handed down to future generations a personalized musical language usually reserved for the classical or jazz guitar student, a performer’s discipline defined by the employment of rich barre chords and harmonic inversions instead of the usual first-position fingerings; contrary melodic motion; inner- and outer-voice counterpoint; the favoring of keys such as F major that were rarely played, in blues at least, by solo acoustic guitarists; fingerling intricacy; a tessitura which spanned the entire guitar neck; and layers of improvisatory logic.\textsuperscript{12} Often compared to Piedmont stylist Blind Blake, Davis approached the guitar less like his ragtime blues peer than someone who modeled his style on the capabilities of the piano, which Davis also played. Davis, in fact, liked to call the guitar the “piano around my neck”\textsuperscript{13} and would introduce certain guitar tunes by saying, “Now I’m gonna play a piano a little bit!”\textsuperscript{14}

But Davis’s place in American music would be secure even without recognition of his guitar “chops.” Musically, his repertoire is one of the most significant links we have between the nineteenth-century pre-blues secular music material of the rural black South – banjo tunes; marches; rags; fox chases; and the many novelty and vaudeville numbers that circulated throughout rural black America by way of circuses, traveling tent shows, and the like – and the emerging blues forms of the early twentieth century. His religious song was equally transitional, drawn in part from the spirituals and ring shouts of the past and the newer gospel material generated largely by the Pentecostal movement that spilled out of the Third Great Awakening and ultimately onto the popular music


\textsuperscript{14}Reverend Gary Davis, spoken intro to “Twelve Sticks,” \textit{Demons and Angels} (Shanachie 6117, 2001).
stage. In essence, the music of Davis is a fascinating window into a turn-of-the-century era when a new, restless generation of younger African Americans rejected the Jim Crow South by singing through it, developing some of the most resilient, popular forms of American music in the process.\textsuperscript{15} In addition, because Davis was so prolifically recorded, we get a good glimpse into the totality of a folk performer’s repertoire and how that repertoire was tailored to individual needs and abilities – highly original performances assembled from snippets of traditional, popular, and newly-generated material.

“He’s one of the important figures in twentieth century American music,” says Rock and Roll Hall of Fame guitarist/singer Jorma Kaukonen, whose post Jefferson Airplane career with Hot Tuna and as the founder of Fur Peace Ranch guitar camp continues to build on Davis’s musical legacy. “He’s certainly incredibly significant as a guitar player but I think his importance transcends the fact that he played guitar – the guitar was just a vehicle for him to translate the things that were in his head. He seemed to have no boundaries really. Look at some of his complex instrumentals. Whatever kind of music appealed to him, he played it.”\textsuperscript{16}

In his lifetime, Davis recorded for more than a dozen labels including the American Record Company in the 1930s; Asch and Lenox in the 1940s; Stinson, Riverside, and Folk-Lyric in the 1950s; Prestige, Vanguard, and Fontana in the 1960s; and Kicking Mule, Biograph, and Adelphi in the 1970s. Since his death, his music has been released and re-released on twice as many labels abroad and in the United States,


\textsuperscript{16}Jorma Kaukonen, interview by author, 10 August 2008, Fur Peace Ranch, Pomeroy, Ohio, tape recording.
and new product continues to come out, tied as it is to a renewed sense of Davis’s stature in recent years.\textsuperscript{17} Two tribute albums are now available, while his performances continue to be issued with regularity on disc, including several rare live and home recordings, a “best-of,” and no less than three multi-disc sets in the past decade.\textsuperscript{18} Founded by Jorma Kaukonen, Fur Peace Ranch guitar camp in Pomeroy, Ohio, has built a cottage industry from the star power of its Rock and Roll Hall of Fame instructor, albeit with Davis’s legacy firmly in mind. The camp’s most touted event is a Reverend Gary Davis tribute weekend and concert now going on for seven years. To cap such plaudits, Davis was inducted 6 May 2009 into the Blues Hall of Fame alongside Taj Mahal, Son Seals, and Irma Thomas.\textsuperscript{19}

From the standpoint of technique, repertoire, and impact on subsequent generations of players, Davis has been and remains a formidable presence, something that can be found in the many guitar tablature books past and present that feature selections of his music (see Appendix Three for a list of instructional books). Yet for all the continued interest, we are left with no satisfying overview of his life let alone his music. This is a

\textsuperscript{17}There is still recognition to be had. Davis doesn’t receive, for example, a single mention in the 700-plus pages of the recent and vast overview edited by Mellonee V. Burnim and Portia K. Maultsby, \textit{African American Music: An Introduction} (New York: Routledge, 2006). Note: a new edition to be published in 2011 will hopefully rectify this oversight.


\textsuperscript{19}I was fortunate to have given the induction speech on Davis that night.
problem, in fact, with the field of pre-war blues and gospel figures in general. There are only some three dozen treatments in book form of individual pre-war blues and gospel singers, which is a remarkably small number given the bounty of performers from the period. Yet this should not be surprising given the difficult task at hand when trying to assemble biographical data on musicians whose lives were often little documented or who lived in relative obscurity beyond the recordings they left behind. In the early 1970s, in an effort to create a body of publications on pre-war figures, blues scholar Paul Oliver oversaw a series of thin volumes that included then-groundbreaking research on aspects of the blues tradition, including studies on the lives of Ma Rainey, Charley Patton, Tommy Johnson, Peetie Wheatstraw, and Little Brother Montgomery. Most books since have been serviceable – with a few excellent – although almost all concentrate on biography to the exclusion of musical analysis and thought. Among more recently published biographies and biographical treatments that present solid investigative and scholarly work are those on Lead Belly (Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell’s *The Life & Legend of Leadbelly*), Thomas Dorsey (*The Rise of Gospel Blues: The Music of Thomas Andrew Dorsey in the Urban Church* by Michael Harris), Josh White (Elijah Wald’s *Josh White: Society Blues*), and Robert Johnson (*Robert Johnson: Lost and Found* by Barry Lee Pearson and Bill McCulloch). Others have received a certain amount of attention...
and acclaim in part from: a) revisionist agendas that can taint the research (Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues, also by Wald; King of the Delta Blues: The Life and Music of Charlie Patton by Stephen Calt and Gayle Wardlow; and Stephen Calt, I’d Rather Be the Devil: Skip James and the Blues), or b) odd interpretive approaches (the surrealist-charged poetic license, for example, that Paul and Beth Garon take in Woman with Guitar: Memphis Minnie’s Blues, the post-modern lens applied by Patricia R. Schroeder in Robert Johnson, Mythmaking, and Contemporary American Culture, or Michael Gray’s peculiar travelogue, Hand Me My Travelin’ Shoes: In Search of Blind Willie McTell).22 The female vaudeville blues singers of the 1920s have been fairly well represented, with several examinations of Bessie Smith (Chris Albertson’s Bessie being the closest to a definitive portrait) as well as studies of Ma Rainey and other so-called “classic” blues singers.23 And there have been a handful of autobiographies beginning with W. C. Handy’s 1941 life story, Father of the Blues, that are valuable as


primary source narratives even when they sometimes fall prey to self-aggrandizement and mythologizing (see the above Handy book as well as Big Bill Broonzy’s reminiscences in *Big Bill Blues*; vaudeville-era songwriter Perry Bradford also published an autobiography in 1965, *Born with the Blues*). The first biography/repertory study of an African American folk musician, the 1936 classic *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* by famed folklorists John A. Lomax and his son Alan Lomax, is still in many ways among the best models for such studies, a rounded look rich with contextual detail in both the singer’s life and repertoire. Even here, however, the Lomaxes offered only musical transcriptions of a song’s melody without instrumental accompaniment (let alone analysis of said accompaniment), in what becomes a treatment of song more as collective folk source than individual performance. This misses, in Lead Belly’s case, significant interactive aspects between his voice and guitar, e.g., his rendition of “C. C. Rider,” in which the slide guitar is a true call-and-answer partner in the song’s musical events.

Still, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* is a landmark achievement, and only a handful of later book-length studies have examined both the life and music of an

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individual in such fashion. Of those, the most important would have to be the Grammy-winning liner notes by blues scholar David Evans to the boxed set “Screamin’ and Hollerin’ the Blues”: The Worlds of Charley Patton, which are a modern ideal in how sound ethnomusicological methods can add to the investigative techniques usually reserved for the folklorist.27

The body of research specifically on Reverend Gary Davis is relatively scant, given the shadow he continues to cast on those guitarists who study folk-blues. The only book-length text devoted exclusively to him (that is not a collection of sheet music, at least) is ‘Oh, What a Beautiful City’: A Tribute to the Reverend Gary Davis (1896-1972), a slim, oversized paperback in which his story is told largely through anecdotes and photographs. Recently reprinted, the 1992 coffee-table-type book was compiled by British author Robert Tilling, a longtime authority on the musician, whose perspective was less that of a musicologist than a fan, a loving appreciation wrapped around a concise presentation of biographical and historical data.28 Bruce Bastin’s seminal work, Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the Southeast, devotes one full chapter to Davis plus select pages on his pivotal role in the development and dissemination of East Coast pre-war blues.29 Bastin places Davis in the midst of a vibrant Piedmont scene of music


making and unearths a number of public records on the guitarist in the process, yet the scope of his book limits our understanding of Davis to his early years in South and North Carolina, which still leaves the need for a portrait of his time in New York (the last half of his life, basically, and the half on which his legacy largely rests).

The leading exponent and publisher of Davis’s music is Stefan Grossman, one of the guitarist’s many students in the 1960s and a person who has since turned the acoustic guitar approach of Davis and his pre-war peers into a cottage industry of tablature books and instructional videos.30 Arguably the most important figure in promoting Davis’s music and keeping his legacy alive since the 1960s, Grossman has released dozens of song books and videos over the years, many of which feature music by his late teacher in one form or another. The most significant for repertoire are two publications from the 1970s: Rev. Gary Davis/The Holy Blues and Rev. Gary Davis/Blues Guitar.31 The former book documents eighty mostly religious songs in Davis’s repertory with only lyrics and melodies transcribed (perfunctory guitar chords are placed above a staff-notated melody). While it collates much of Davis’s sacred repertoire under one cover, the transcriptions lack, as in the aforementioned Lead Belly volume, the role of the guitar in the song process (the skeletal guitar chords give not the vaguest hint as to how Davis actually played this music), nor do the melodic transcriptions account for the “bluesy” bends and

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neutral pitches in Davis’s singing, not to mention the strong element of improvisation in voice and guitar that Davis brought to strophic repeats. \textit{Rev. Gary Davis/Blues Guitar} is much better in the latter regard: in it are nineteen transcriptions and the first tutorial guide to deal with the performer’s complex instrumental style. It remains an important book historically even when the notation, in some cases, was misleadingly simplified. Another advocate of the Davis style, fellow former student Woody Mann, also published tablature and notation of Davis tunes in his book \textit{Six Early Blues Guitarists} (New York: Oak Publications, 1978). In somewhat more satisfactory fashion than Grossman, Mann doesn’t shy away from some of the challenging aspects of Davis’s playing, though even he can overlook details in an effort to present an edition playable by guitar students. Mann, however, bothered to transcribe only the instrumental portions of the songs, eschewing all notation of the vocal melody (although lyrics are included). If a potential student didn’t have access to Davis’s recordings, he would have to read from both Grossman and Mann to arrive at any sort of finished edition of a song!

Fortunately, the latest pedagogical insights come from a series of instructional videos and accompanying tablature booklets by Pittsburgh guitarist Ernie Hawkins, another person who studied at great length with Davis. Released through Stefan Grossman’s publishing company, Hawkins’s five videos delineate the mechanics of playing thirty-six tunes by Davis taught with the patience and exactness of his onetime teacher.\textsuperscript{32} Quite simply, Hawkins has set the modern standard in the teaching of Davis’s technique and repertoire. Yet even here, the music has been prepared and presented for

\textsuperscript{32}\textit{Gospel Guitar of Rev. Gary Davis} (Omnibus GW813/14/15/16, 2002); \textit{Blues Guitar of Rev. Gary Davis} (Omnibus GW 978/79, 2007); \textit{Ragtime Guitar of Rev. Gary Davis} (Omnibus GW980/81, 2007); \textit{Rags and Minstrel Show Songs of Rev. Gary Davis} (Omnibus GW982/83, 2007); and \textit{Novelty Instrumentals of Rev. Gary Davis} (Omnibus GW984, 2007).
the guitarist who wants to learn how to recreate Davis’s style. That is not the intent of this study, and my transcriptions – based on distinct performances and used primarily for musical analysis – vary from the typical idealized presentations found even in the best Davis sheet music and instruction.

After the above publications, what we have in the way of printed material on Davis is in the form of miscellanea: numerous articles in (mostly) blues and folk music periodicals and a vast array of liner notes from Davis’s many recordings. Thankfully, a wide range of primary sources exists to better construct a history on Davis. They are as follows:

**Interviews with Davis:** Davis didn’t give many formal interviews, which makes the few we have valuable documents. The most important of these would have to be his first, conducted by Alan Lomax’s then-wife, Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold, who talked with Davis over several months in 1951. The unpublished manuscript, held in the Alan Lomax Archive, is significant for a number of reasons: it is the first interview of Davis that we have and thereby becomes the closest to providing a real folkloric portrait of the artist pre-fame, plus it provides biographical details arguably more accurate at times than later recollections; it is also the most in-depth interview ever given by Davis, with the manuscript at 187 pages plus seven pages of notes by Harold; and Davis talked about a number of topics he would rarely if ever discuss again, especially blindness. The next

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34 A few pages from this interview can be found in the liner notes to the CD *Lifting the Veil: The First Bluesmen* (World Arbiter 1266424, 2007).
most-extensive interview came in interviews meant for a film about Davis by director Lionel Rogosin, who had featured the musical preacher in his 1970 documentary, Black Roots. Almost an hour exists of Davis being interviewed at his home in Jamaica, Queens, during the winter of 1971-1972 by Rogosin and Larry Johnson, and Davis opens up on issues, notably race, that he typically didn’t broach in such a candid manner otherwise.35 In the 1960s, Stephen T. Rye, John Offord, and Richard A. Noblett interviewed Davis in a series of short articles that ran in Blues Unlimited.36 In 1962 and 1968, Stefan Grossman talked with Davis on tape in what has become the performer’s most widely disseminated set of interviews, in part because of the insights Davis gave on his music: technique, repertoire, influences, etc.37 And Blues World published a likely final interview by Gerard J. Homan months before Davis’s death.38

**Interviews with those who knew Davis**: So many people interacted with Davis from the 1950s through his death – guitar students, friends and fellow musicians, club

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35Such a film has never surfaced, though Annie Davis wrote to Manny Greenhill on several occasions that she had been interviewed as well by Rogosin for the project following Gary Davis’s death. The interview is available as part of the Joan Fenton Collection, FT-1339, in the Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.


owners, business acquaintances, concert goers and fans – that a vital portrait of the guitarist can be gleaned from their recollections, something Tilling does to a small degree in ‘Oh, What a Beautiful City’. Many of the guitarists Davis taught went on to their own musical careers and have commented, sometimes at length, about their mentor in print, as in folk music legend Dave Van Ronk’s recollections in The Mayor of MacDougal Street. For some such as Van Ronk, himself now deceased, these glimpses into Davis can be as important a source as the Piedmont guitarist’s own words. More than two dozen people have kindly gone on record with me to discuss aspects of Davis’s life and music, including key students and protégés such as Ernie Hawkins, Roy Book Binder, and Jorma Kaukonen as well as those who intimately knew him, none more so than Lead Belly’s niece Tiny Robinson and her husband John Robinson. In addition, I have sought out professional opinion when illumination is needed on a particular topic – for example, I consulted an ophthalmologist who offers significant new thought on the cause of Davis’s blindness.

**Private home tapes:** I am also fortunate to have been provided dozens of hours of lessons and informal performances by Davis that Ernie Hawkins recorded between 1968 and 1970 as well as more than six hours of Davis performances in the collection of Andy Cohen that were taped by a Michigan sphere of students/fans from the 1960s including Rick Ruskin, Rowena Reik, and Dick Meltzer. This documentation is extremely beneficial in fleshing out the picture of Davis, revealing sides of his persona and repertoire often mentioned but rarely examined. In Hawkins’s case, this would include Davis in the role of teacher and secular songster, while on the Michigan tapes, Davis is

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shown to be even more imaginative and engaging a musician when he was in informal settings such as dinners and parties, where the camaraderie, cigars, and liquor all flowed in equal measure. These tapes also add to the scope of Davis’s seemingly endless repertoire, capturing a substantial number of songs he never recorded commercially.

**Documents and ephemera:** Provided me by the Library of Congress are the welfare case files on Davis located by Richard Spottswood and housed at the American Folklife Center. This collection (which Bruce Bastin also drew on for much of his research in *Red River Blues*) includes more than seventy pages of welfare documents on Davis from 1931 to 1948, offering invaluable evidence of Davis’s activity in Durham, North Carolina, and New York City. The South Carolina School for the Deaf and the Blind, which Davis briefly attended, has provided me all the extant materials they have on him. Census research I’ve undertaken throws some added light on Davis’s movements, and newspaper accounts, especially from the *New York Times*, give a good overview of Davis’s activity and growing acclaim from the 1950s to the 1970s. Finally, a set of letters that wife Annie Davis wrote between 1963 and 1977 to Davis’s management company, Folklore Productions (shared courtesy of the company) resolve additional questions.

**Recordings and filmed footage:** The best documentation we have on Davis, of course, is the bounty of music he left behind – hundreds of home, studio, and concert recordings that speak to Davis as a musician, person, and bearer of cultural tradition and identity. To paraphrase Lawrence Levine in his landmark work, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, the tacit history and wisdom imbedded in the “sacred world” of songs, tales, and beliefs of African American oral culture wasn’t lost on Davis, whose music
was his story. In that light, his recordings are worth reexamining for what they say about song choices, contextual issues, biographical intimations (the segues and spoken interludes from his live recordings are often as entertaining and revealing as the performances proper), philosophical underpinnings, and the overall approach to life lived in many ways as an improvisatory act, a necessary survival strategy of street smarts and higher calling that ensured Davis would be heard by his God, and his God by Davis’s fans. There is also a modest amount of filmed footage on Davis (collected by Grossman on one DVD but also largely available on the internet thanks to YouTube) and, here, Davis’s often confounding technique better reveals itself.

Taken as a whole, the research and analytic perspectives in “I Belong to the Band” provide an expansive portrait of Davis and his music, a study that asks “What can biography tell us about the music, and what can the music tell about biography?” For Davis, the two were inseparable, resulting in a man fiercely talented and fiercely independent, someone whose circumstance demanded no other choice than to be determined in life and unrivaled in song. Like many geniuses, Davis refused to be like anyone else. “I’ve got fiery fingers, and I’ve got fiery hands,” he would sing with the proud admission of someone who knew he was just a bit better than the average musician. “And when I get up in heaven, I’m going to join that fiery band.” That he left so many “acolytes” to continue his work is perhaps the greatest legacy of this street preacher, who took personal adversity and strife and rendered it into a transforming art.

As onetime student Larry Johnson summed up: “I felt that Gary was a tree, and many branches had come from that tree.”

As an aside to the above hyperbole, by focusing on the music of Davis, whose music I greatly admire, I in no way mean to inflate or elevate, as has become all too typical in biographical treatments of musicians, the achievements of one artist (Davis) above those of his contemporaries. The vast body of African American song is a true marvel, and Davis was among thousands who were lucky enough to have been recorded so that we can still hear – and appreciate – their talents and stories.

A NOTE ON TRANSCRIPTION METHOD

For the better part of a century, a number of transcription methods have been devised and advocated with the aim to more accurately present on paper musical sounds that fall outside the purview of the great body of Western art music and its notational emphasis on pitch and duration. This has included various types of automatic transcription (Milton Metfessel’s application of phonophotography in the 1920s, the advocacy of the melograph by Charles Seeger, Karl Dahlback and others in the 1950s and 1960s); Mantle Hood’s call for dance notation (Labanotation) as a solution in the 1970s; the adoption of linguistic systems; computer analysis and graphs; and the employment of a culture’s existing system such as Chinese and Javanese cipher notations. Yet these solutions can often make matters more confusing for those outside

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the circle of a particular culture or in-group of researchers and scholars. Therefore, some version of Western notation is usually most practical, and here we can still defer to Otto Abraham and Erich M. von Hornbostel, who made the first comprehensive effort to codify the methods and symbols of transcription for traditional world music, and whose thoughts, now a century old, are in many ways still among the best. “Simplicity and accuracy of notation should not be obscured by a mass of diacritic marks,” they write. “A compromise must be made between clarity and objective accuracy.”

Davis plucked guitar with only his right hand thumb and first finger, yet the musical gestures he could summon often extended beyond the notes of the outer bass and treble voices, and when necessary a fuller tonal and timbral picture will be presented. Still, in seeking to best represent what Davis did, I have tried not to get so detail-oriented that the notation becomes unnecessarily cumbersome and/or unreadable (think Bartók’s transcriptions of Hungarian folk song), and here I am reminded of Ruth Crawford Seeger’s thoughts on the transcription of folk song: “The subtle variation given by a particular singer possesses an artistic quality lost in the printed single melody and arrangement.” To that end, I have aimed to present clear and useful transcribed musical examples, ones that incorporate some of the more common extra-notational symbols, such as up and down arrows to indicate microtonal variance in pitch, and the use of “x”


44 Charles and Ruth Seeger, Musical Forward, in Folk Song U. S. A., ed. John A Lomax and Alan Lomax (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1947), xii. For some of the best thoughts to this day on the transcription process in folk music, see Ruth Crawford Seeger, The Music of American Folk Song and Selected Other Writings on American Folk Music, ed. Larry Polansky, with Judith Tick (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2001), 7-30.
note heads and headless note fragments to indicate melodies that are more Sprechstimme or parlando-like, which was a vocal device favored by Davis, especially when he sang secular material. This approach is similar to that used by David Evans in *Big Road Blues* and Jeff Todd Titon in *Early Downhome Blues*, two classics in the genre that provide clean yet nuanced notation. Occasionally, guitar tablature is also called upon to better illustrate fingeri and fretboard choices.

Unless otherwise noted, all transcriptions are my own. It is not my intention to undo what others have done – I find no need to compete with the many tablature books (good or bad) that feature Davis’s music. My aim is different. Instead of the kind of idealized versions of a song that get edited for a tablature book – what are essentially the prescriptive contours of how a future musical performance might be achieved – I am more concerned with the information retrieved from the descriptive contours and the contextualizing of what has already transpired – that is, how a past musical performance actually sounded. In selecting musical examples, I have picked what I feel most represent or illustrate a particular point, which may or (more likely) may not be the first statement of a theme, stanza, or musical idea. This is because a performance may include a “warming up” period of initial material that gathers musical coherence and form as it becomes a song and thus can have as much musical variance as a more premeditated improvisation – Davis’s blues especially act in this manner. Where words are unclear, I have either underlined what I perceive to be the phrase or have left it blank by using ellipses.

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Concerning notation, I have kept convention, which places the guitar on the treble staff even though the instrument sounds an octave lower than indicated. Unless otherwise indicated, Davis’s twelve-string guitar playing will be treated on the staff as if played on a six-string guitar – his repertoire was interchangeable on both instruments as was his technique, and incorporating the doubled and octave courses on a notated staff would only serve to obfuscate the issue in most cases. As far as pitch is concerned, Davis tuned to the song more than to any ideal of standardized pitch, and some performances could be below or above standard pitch as a result. In the case of his twelve-string guitar and banjo performances, pitch was almost always below standard, consciously so. I make mention of such discrepancies but largely ignore them in my transcriptions, which are mostly set in a song’s intended key if the instrument were tuned to pitch. This is because the mechanics of what Davis did on the fretboard had a lot more to do with key/chord choice than with pitch. For example, a twelve-string guitar performance played in a C position might actually be closer to B-flat in pitch, but transcribing it as such would not give any idea of how Davis played those notes as he intended in a C chord shape. Such situations are noted in the examples where they occur. Also, tempo indications are at the point of transcription and not the beginning of the performance. Acceleration of tempo is a common quality within the body of African American vernacular music (enacting, among other things, increased musical participation and excitement), and where obvious acceleration takes place within a transcribed example, an arrow will delineate beginning and ending tempos.

A larger issue – one that isn’t resolved here – is that of rhythm. Rhythmic values in much African American music are treated with a certain looseness usually thought of
as a relationship of long-short note values, an unequal rhythmic value that permeates Davis’s musical approach as well. Typically, when two adjacent eighth notes present themselves, they would be performed closer in feel to a quarter-and-eighth triplet. Neither a dotted figure nor the notes inégales of French Baroque and Classical performance practice, this quality is usually treated like the “swing triplets” of jazz charts, i.e., by indicating at the head of a popular piece of music to perform adjacent eighth notes of equal value as a triplet. An alternative method, far more grievous in my opinion, is to translate everything into 12/8 meter. This is potentially misleading, since not every rhythm was played as if unequal, and it ignores a more overriding factor – the rhythmic tension and release that exists as a result of triplet-like figures moving against a 4/4 or 2/4 pulse. This push-and-pull is an essential quality to much, if not most, African American music, resulting in music that inhabits simultaneously ease and forward momentum. As jazz drummer Charlie Persip explained: “See, the triplet feeling in rhythm, ‘dah-dah-dah, dah-dah-dah,’ makes you relax. It makes you hold back; you can’t rush triplets. But the duple part of the rhythm is like marches, ‘one and two and’ or ‘one and two and three and four and.’ That kind of division of time makes you move ahead, forge ahead, march – ‘boom, boom, boom, boom.’ That’s the push of the rhythm. And that’s why it’s so nice when you combine those two feelings. Then you get a complete rhythm that marches and still relaxes.”

Western notation can only take us so far in suggesting the rich ambiguities and expressivity of such rhythm, which, for Davis at least, grew out of his admiration for and imitation of stride piano with its syncopated right hand played against a straight left hand.

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A recent, ground-breaking study of this rhythmic aspect showed that, in the case of five post-bop jazz musicians, the “beat-upbeat ratio” or BUR of two subsequent eight notes was not as unequal as the 2:1 ratio of a true triplet would suggest, but that it was significantly less, a “feeling of long-shortness at its ‘mildest’ possible state.”\footnote{Fernando Benadon, “Slicing the Beat: Jazz Eight-Notes as Expressive Microrhythm,” \textit{Ethnomusicology} 50, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 88.} The study also found that all five performers navigated this rhythm differently, suggesting that rhythm is as much a marker of individuality as the neutral tones of the blues scale are melodically. For the sake of this paper, I have opted to place notes in common meter with triplets indicated where necessary. In general, this gives the reader a better indication of the actual rhythmic value(s) than either 12/8 or straight with the implied value of swinging the note (the latter instructionally practical only when performing or teaching the music). In some cases, however, where note values are only slightly unequal (in which case a triplet figure would be the exaggeration), I’ve written the music as equal-value eighth notes indicating at the head that they are played with a slight swing feel.

Finally, I am largely not interested in complete or total transcription (the detailed systematic documentation of every note and gesture from a performance’s start to finish), but instead use what has been labeled “selective” transcription (the analysis of certain features or sections to best illustrate a point) and “intuitive” transcription (emphasizing a song’s most striking features).\footnote{Bruno Nettl, \textit{Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology} (New York: The Free Press, 1964), 135-139.} Even then, the fluid nature of performance by someone like Davis, who was skilled at improvisation, means that a faithful transcription can only address the parameters of any given musical moment rather than suggest some sort of
musical ideal. To quote Bruce Jackson, “Musical transcriptions should be considered samples of what the song might be like; the complete song cannot be reconstructed from the partial transcriptions because of the continuing variation common in folk song.” For an artist such as Davis, presenting his music in a sort of fictionalized final score potentially undermines other processes that were at work – the impermanent gifts of spontaneity and adjustability, especially in a concert setting – that were arguably more important to him than any notion of a fixed composition or arrangement, which he also had in his repertory. Musical gesture and the hint of a traditional tune were sometimes all that Davis needed to explore on his instrument. Like many examples in the great body of African American vernacular music, Davis’s songs behaved not as set pieces to be replicated faithfully each time but as ever-dynamic acts of remembrance, reinvention, and renewal.

A NOTE ON RHYME SCHEMES

In dealing with lyrical formula, I use AAa when describing the blues rhyme scheme known by most as AAB. I have chosen this alteration for a couple of reasons. For starters, it more accurately describes the nature of the rhymed lines, where a capital “A” refers to a line of literal repetition and a lower-case “a” indicates a line that rhymes, as in the following stanza:

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50Far from universally endorsed by blues scholars or fans, there is nonetheless precedent for using AAa to describe blues lyric formula; see, for example, Karen J. Ford, “These Old Writing Paper Blues: The Blues Stanza and Literary Poetry,” *College Literature* 24, no. 3 (October 1997): 84-103.
A Some people tell me God takes care of old folks and fools.
A Some people tell me that God takes care of old folks and fools.
a But since I’ve been born they must of have changed His rules.  

Also, this distinction maintains consistency within my overall lyrical analysis, which includes many other blues and gospel rhyme schemes that require a mix of upper and lower case letters, such as the examples below. Other shorthand additions that help elucidate rhyming nuances include R for refrain (as in a twelve-bar blues with refrain, shortened to 12-barR); a slash to indicate a half-line interior rhyme; a superscript numeral to signify a line that rhymes with another line but repeats as well (as in a refrain); and a superscript letter to delineate only the last part of a line that is repeated, as in a refrain tag. Finally, v stands for verse and ch for chorus.

The following stanza, then, would be AAb/bA^A:

A If I catch you doin’ what I caught you doin’ last night, have you put back in jail;
A If I catch you doin’ what I caught you doin’ last night, have you put back in jail.
b/b Said reckon what the elephant said to the cat? “Got a belly full of hair and I’m tight like that.”
A^A Now if I catch you doin’ what I caught you doin’ last night, have you put back in jail, I mean, have you put back in jail.

The next example would read a/aBB\(^1\), where the verse has an interior rhyme over the first four measures (the part often reserved for the first full A line in an AAa form) followed by a refrain that repeats the last two lines every stanza:

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a/a  Take my liquor standing up, my whiskey sitting down; man cross my path,
      I’m gonna run him out of town.
B  ’Cause I’m a hard pushing papa, don’t know when to stop.
B¹  ‘Cause I’m a hard pushing papa, push you until you drop.⁵³

CHAPTER II

“GREAT CHANGE SINCE I BEEN BORN”: A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Given Reverend Gary Davis’s musical stature, few concrete details have been forthcoming on his life, especially his early years, this in spite of the many interviews he gave as well as the access and familiarity others had with him during the heyday of the folk and blues revival in the 1950s and 1960s. Nonetheless, a relatively reliable biographical portrait can be pieced together, and while it leaves much to be desired, it supplies enough background that we can begin to understand Davis’s talent through the cultural and epochal lens of his time. Inconsistencies abound about his life, many provided by the man himself, though his own comments are often the most valuable source we have. As noted in Chapter I, many sources have helped me compile a reliable biography on Davis, including various interviews with him; the thorough research of Bruce Bastin in his authoritative book on Piedmont blues, Red River Blues; my own examination of census, welfare, and blind school records; recollections of those who knew him; and newspapers, album notes, and recordings.¹ Where dates and details are

vague or disagree, I have tried to defer to Davis’s own accounts, even though these can be frustratingly incomplete and conflicting at times.

One thing we do know. Gary Davis was born into an unfriendly world. Just weeks after his birth – 30 April 1896 in Laurens County, South Carolina – the Supreme Court upheld “separate but equal” racial segregation in the case Plessy v. Ferguson. Decided on 18 May 1896, the ruling backed a state’s right to segregate public transportation, which opened the legal doors to a pervasive climate of segregation that impinged on all aspects of public life from parks and residential areas to schools and the workplace. The ruling’s implications wouldn’t be overturned until 1954 with Brown v. Board of Education. At the time, validation from the top tiers of government meant that Jim Crow laws and discriminatory practices, and violent acts of murder and lynching were even more rampant. As the Boston Daily Globe observed only days after the Supreme Court’s decision, singling out the tacit approval of onetime emancipators in Lincoln’s party:

“What has the republican party done for the race during the last five years, when colored people have been murdered and lynched in cold blood, and the platform of the party has been as silent as the tomb.” Laurens County, in particular, had an infamous history of attacks against black farmers, who struggled for decades to eke out an existence. This fed into South Carolina’s out-of-control gun culture, which prompted one state judge to write

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of the “deplorable custom of carrying pistols, a custom carried to such an extent, that our
State may be regarded as an armed camp in times of peace. Our young men and boys,
black and white, rich and poor, seem to think that their outfit is not complete without a
pistol.”

It was also a world of great change and progress. Motion pictures and automobiles
were in their infancy, the x-ray machine was developed, and the modern Olympic Games
debuted in Athens. It was the era of the cakewalk and of ragtime’s emerging dominance
in popular song and on the piano. And the political, economic, and social setbacks
suffered by African Americans were countered by the leadership of Booker T.
Washington, who advocated “self-reliance and self-awakening,” especially in the areas of
labor and education.5

All of these forces and more shaped Davis, a product of post-Reconstruction
America whose life spanned the administrations of Presidents Grover Cleveland to
Richard Nixon and whose early years we can piece together with some degree of
certainty.

Gary Davis was born to parents John and Evelina Belle Davis on a small farm in
Laurens County, South Carolina, between the towns of Laurens and Clinton. Laurens
County, a rural area in the northwest part of state, was “way down in the country,”
according to Davis, “so far you couldn’t hear a train whistle blow unless it was on a

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4George Brown Tindall, South Carolina Negroes 1877-1900 (Columbia: University of South
Carolina Press, 1952), 236.

322.
Davis recalled that his family sharecropped on a plantation owned by a Mr. Abercrombie, where they raised chickens, cattle, and hogs, and tended a fruit orchard that grew peaches, apples, plums, pears, and apricots; they also moved frequently, no less than a dozen times in his first seven years. Like much of South Carolina at the time, Laurens County had a predominately black population, one in which the male population mostly did agricultural labor and/or farming of some kind. Much of this labor was centered on cotton, which had been a major crop staple in Laurens and other upper-state counties since the 1820s. Census data from 1900 show South Carolina to have been one of only two states, alongside Mississippi, where the majority of its citizens were black. In the case of South Carolina, 782,321 people, or 58.4 percent, of the total population were African American, a figure that ranked the state fourth behind Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama for the largest state black population in the United States. Still, by 1895,
this majority was only able to elect five delegates to the state constitutional convention, leading the state to be characterized politically as “a minority white man’s government, operated by him for his own benefit.” Yet this had been the case for most of the nineteenth century for South Carolina, which had had a black majority since 1820. Within that frame, Laurens County in 1900 had 22,177 black residents to 15,205 white residents, though the town of Laurens, which had doubled in size since the 1890 census, was the opposite with 2,424 whites to 1,605 blacks. In other words, most black residents lived in the rural confines of the county, subsisting largely on sharecropping for a livelihood, which post-Reconstruction combined with voter suppression efforts and lack of educational opportunities to make South Carolina blacks among the poorest in the Union.

Ku Klux Klan activity in the 1870s brought a wave of brutality that carried over post-Reconstruction into the state’s western Piedmont. Fueled by animosity among regional white farmers and retaliatory anti-labor action toward black farmers, who had made early attempts to organize, western South Carolina was the bloodiest part of the

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14 Census Reports Volume 1: Twelfth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1900 – Population, Part I, 519, 642.

15 Gallay and Finkelman, “South Carolina,” 188.
state for lynchings, including nine African Americans murdered on election day in 1898 in Greenwood County as a ploy to suppress the black vote.\textsuperscript{16}

Davis’s birth date was April 30, and his birth year was most likely 1896.\textsuperscript{17} Other possible years include 1895, which is listed on several documents from his Durham welfare files (case #282) including an eye exam and visitor’s report by the North Carolina State Commission for the Blind, both from 1937.\textsuperscript{18} According to a letter written by wife Annie Davis, her husband was 48 when they married in 1943, which would also confirm 1895.\textsuperscript{19} Two other possibilities are 1897 (listed on his 1914 application to blind school and his file in the Social Security death index); and, oddly enough, 1905. This latter year comes from the 1910 United States Census, taken 19 April 1910, which lists a Gary Davis, age five, living with his widowed farm laborer mother, spelled Eveline, age thirty-seven, and three other siblings in Laurens township (see Appendix 1). An older son, Wister (sic?), is listed as twelve years old, and since Davis was known to have had a younger brother that survived into adulthood, I suspect the census taker mixed up the boys. This is also likely the case since Wister’s age roughly corresponds to Davis’s age at that time assuming he was born ca. 1897 – not to mention that Davis at five would have


\textsuperscript{17}Davis’s gravestone lists his birth year as 1896, which corresponds to the age given on his first marriage certificate in 1919, and is the year that matches his statement to Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold from March/April 1951 that he would be turning 55 soon (reel III, p. 1). This was also the year given to author Robert Tilling by Davis and his wife – ‘Oh, What a Beautiful City’, 5 – the one Davis gave to Stefan Grossman – \textit{Rev. Gary Davis/Blues Guitar}, 7 – and the one supported by Bruce Bastin – \textit{Red River Blues}, 171.

\textsuperscript{18}Documents part of the Spottswood Collection, Library of Congress.

\textsuperscript{19}Annie Davis, New York City, to Manny Greenhill’s assistant, Nancy Kubo, Boston, 29 June 1970; letter in private collection of Folklore Productions, Santa Monica, California.
made him all of fourteen at the time of his first marriage in 1919! More accurate in the 1910 census, Eveline is listed as a widow, which corroborates the story Davis heard as a child that his father was shot and killed by a sheriff in Birmingham, Alabama, around 1906.\(^{20}\) The few times he discussed the incident, Davis was frustratingly vague about the details. In all fairness, he might not have been told much information by relatives, given his young age and the apparent violent death of his father. But he did elaborate once, telling student/journalist Alex Shoumatoff a story so gruesome that one can see why Davis normally declined talking about it: “He [my father] told a woman to stop coming to see him; she came around and he cut her throat. Then he ran around telling everybody, ‘I killed a woman. Come and get me.’ The sheriff and his deputies came and he shot one – but the sheriff got him.”\(^{21}\)

Davis was one of eight children, though only two survived beyond adolescence (five children are listed as living in the 1910 census). The other surviving sibling, from a second marriage by Evelina, was younger half-brother Buddy Pinson, whom Davis taught to play guitar and who was stabbed to death sometime in the 1920s by an irate girlfriend.\(^{22}\) According to most accounts given by Davis, he went blind a few weeks after birth due to an eye ointment improperly administered either by his mother, a doctor, or a medicine show “doctor,” yet the likely cause had no real culprit: Davis was born with a congenital condition that would have rendered him blind no matter what remedy had

\(^{20}\)Davis, interview by Harold, April/May 1951, reel 1, side 1, p 2. Harold’s original spellings, including her odd approximations of vernacular talk, have been retained for historical accuracy of the primary source document.

\(^{21}\)Alex Shoumatoff, “The Reverend Gary Davis,” \textit{Rolling Stone} 98 (23 December 1971): 34. A cursory look at Birmingham newspapers from that year yielded no such account.

\(^{22}\)Bastin, \textit{Red River Blues}, 243. The woman used a butcher knife on the brother, who was 25; see Shoumatoff, “The Reverend Gary Davis,” \textit{Rolling Stone} 98: 34.
been given (see Chapter Eight for fuller discussion). Early on, he was handed over to his maternal grandmother, who raised him in nearby Gray Court. Davis remembered his grandmother’s name to also be Eveline Cheek, and that is the name – Evelina – signed on his blind school application. But when we access the 1870 and 1880 census, we find another possible name – Adeline, or Adaline, Cheek, mother to an Evelina (see Appendix 1). Perhaps Evelina was the grandmother’s second name, a nickname, or one she used as a sign of affection or way to assuage the pain Davis felt by not having his real mother around. We know that Davis took the abandonment by his parents hard, commenting to Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold that, “I felt lak I was throwed away”; he also confided to Harold that his mother never carried him anywhere except one time to church, where “she cussed all the way theah an back,” and that she was a “rough woman” who “liked a good time, you know. Just to be twistin about from one place to another.”23 That might have been, but it’s also probable that the stress of having a disabled child took its toll on young parents who were arguably unequipped to deal physically and emotionally with the demands of raising a blind child. An anecdote by blind pop musician Tom Sullivan gives clues into the trauma, associations of guilt, anger, and denial that a family can undergo when a child is rendered blind. Wrote Sullivan: “Dad vanished for five days. Friends and family made inquiries. There was not a bar within miles of home that dad had not visited. Mom eventually sent out one of dad’s barmen to track him down. His fury was spent but he still refused to accept my blindness as permanent.”24 But such abandonment was hard

23Davis, interview by Harold, April/May 1951, reel 1, side 1, pp. 3-4.

24Tom Sullivan and Derek Gill, If You Could See What I Hear (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 8-9. That Davis’s family would have trouble adjusting is not uncommon. A seven-phase model of adjustment that families go through when a member has a visual impairment takes the following order: 1) physical or social trauma; 2) shock and denial; 3) mourning and withdrawal; 4) succumbing and depression; 5) reassessment and reaffirmation; 6) coping and mobilization; and 7) self-acceptance and self-
if not impossible for Davis to process, even when he reconnected with his mother shortly before her death years later. Playing before a group of young admirers in the 1960s, Davis was asked to play “Motherless Children,” to which someone callously piped in, “You got any songs about fatherless children?” Davis, incensed, replied:

No I ain’t got none at all. I ain’t got no ‘Fatherless Children.’ All these children here have got fathers and got mothers . . . If my mother were living today, I’d be proud. She never was no good to me, though. She didn’t care nothing about me, but I’d be glad she was living. [He then breaks into character, as if to keep from showing emotion.] ‘I ain’t got no mother and no father, no sisters, no brothers. Nobody. I ain’t got nobody but me’ . . . Now what do you think about that?25

Davis showed an affinity for music from an early age, and made ad hoc stringed instruments from his grandmother’s pie tins. He also sang at his grandmother’s church, the Center Rabun Baptist Church in Gray Court. By the age of seven, he had learned harmonica, banjo, and guitar in that order. The guitar especially fascinated Davis, who later recalled, “The first time I ever heard a guitar played I thought it was a brass band coming through.”26 A neighbor, Craig Fowler, showed the young musician some things on guitar as did an uncle, though Davis later downplayed the latter’s role, stating to Stefan Grossman that he showed Davis nothing: “Nobody ever showed me anything. I worked it out myself.”27 Another uncle, his mother’s brother William, gave him his first
harmonica. 28 At age seven, Davis’s mother bought him his first guitar for two-and-a-half dollars (one of the few nice memories he recounted about her). 29 The first song Davis recalled learning on guitar was “Little Darlin’, You Don’t Know My Mind,” while in 1910, he heard his first blues-like song, “Delia,” played by a traveling guitarist, Porter Irving.

Around 1910, Davis relocated to Greenville, South Carolina, where, for the next few years, he was part of a popular string band with fellow blind guitarist Willie Walker (brother of Joe Walker, one of Josh White’s many lead boy charges) and Will Bonds, who taught Davis how to play “Candy Man.” 30 Money was minimal for such bands, which in Davis’s case was a sextet with two guitars, two violins, an upright bass, and a mandolin. 31 For comparison, a group that played in the Chapel Hill area in the 1920s and 1930s, black string band the Chapel Hillbillies, would make three to five dollars a gig for the entire band when playing the white fraternity parties, while at chitlin struts and black parties, they might walk away with some new clothes or all the liquor they could consume. 32

On 28 August 1914, Davis was admitted to the South Carolina Institute for the Education of the Deaf and the Blind at Cedar Springs in Spartanburg, where he learned

28 William’s last name was given as Sexton in a 1937 case history on Davis by the Durham welfare department; case #282, 21 July 1937, Spottswood Collection, Library of Congress. The surname Sertion (likely a misspelling) was also given in another file (case #55, August 1936).

29 Davis, interview by Harold, April/May 1951, reel 1, side 2, pp. 2-3.

30 Bastin, Red River Blues, 171.


how to play the organ and read the New York Point Braille system.\textsuperscript{33} He only stayed six months and left, according to Davis, because of the bad food, though not before meeting fellow blind musician Simmie Dooley in Spartanburg.\textsuperscript{34} Davis next spent a brief period in Fountain Inn, South Carolina, where his mother was working and where he busked, i.e., played in public places for money as a street performer, in addition to performing for dances.\textsuperscript{35} He then returned to Greenville and proceeded to get “wild” playing barrelhouses and places of ill repute.\textsuperscript{36}

As an itinerant musician, Davis moved around a fair bit, including some travel into Tennessee, Georgia, and even Texas. He shared enough stories about his journeys to leave no doubt as to the harsh realities of that life, as in the time he and some companions passed through Augusta.

We boys were walking out through the town trying to find out where the colored section was at. Run across a white fellow. You had to say “Captain” down there to him, it was always. Said, “Hey, Captain.” Said, “Yes?” Talked at us right nice. Said, “Can you give us any information?” Said, “What information would you like to have?” Said, “We want to find out where the colored folks hang out at.” Said, “Why, sure, sure, just follow right, follow me.” Now he didn’t call us niggers, but he looked at us, said, “Y’all fellows, y’all two fellows can’t see, can you?” “No, sir.” “Will this fellow lead then?” Said, “Yes, sir.” “Well, come on, follow me. I’ll show you where to hang out at.” He gone a long ways, he’s so happy, just whistling – do da loodle doodle doodle doodle . . . He never stopped till he gots down there to that river, you understand. You know that’s a deep river in Augusta, Georgia. We stopped. He said, “You see that white oak tree down there right by the river? . . . Well, that’s where every goddamn niggers hangs out at. I started to hollering. He said, “Don’t you holler until I can get you back to the

\textsuperscript{33}He was apparently sent there by a white patron who had been impressed by his guitar playing; see Stephen Calt, liner notes to Reverend Gary Davis, \textit{New Blues and Gospel: 1971 Vol. 1} (Biograph BLP-12030, 1971).

\textsuperscript{34}Bastin, \textit{Red River Blues}, 172.

\textsuperscript{35}Davis, interview by Harold, April/May 1951, reel 1, side 2, p. 4.

\textsuperscript{36}Ibid., 4.
station.” He got a taxi, and we went back to the station. I stayed there till the next morning. And the train pulled out, and then we had to pay a dollar to go across the bridge. We weren’t allowed but seventeen miles out of Augusta, Georgia, on that train, and it cost us a dollar.  

On 17 June 1919, Davis married Mary Hendrix in Greenville, where she had been rooming in the same house as his uncle William. He was 23. She was 28. The 1920 census shows the couple renting in Greenville, with Mary listed as someone who washes and irons and Gary (spelled “Garey”) working as a street musician. No children are mentioned (he had none, that we know of), though it was apparently a very sexual relationship, according to what Davis told student Ernie Hawkins and his girlfriend:

Me and my first wife, you know, one or two o’clock at night sometimes we be playing – ahh, somebody knock on the door. “What you doing to that woman?” “We just be playing.” I just want to play. I love to play, you understand? I have joy, don’t you? That’s when you’re with somebody that you want to be, and then you kiss them back. You’re in joy. Sometime I grab her by the foot and go to tickle her on the foot. “Ahh, I kick your brains out. Ahh, stop. Please stop!” I was always doing something to her, you understand. “What you doing? Quit now, don’t do that.” Sometime I come in I be so sleepy. She say, “Wake up. You ain’t gonna sleep none.” She just grab the cover and pull it plum off the bed, you know, throw it on the floor and then get started. We’d be started running all over the house playing with one another. Sometime we’d get so far, run out in the yard late at night. Playing, you understand?

Yet by 1924, the marriage had failed. As Davis told Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold, “After I found out she had a living husband it was time for me to discard huh . . . I stayed single

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374:51-7:02 into track 2 of digital copy, Reverend Gary Davis, interview by Larry Johnson and Lionel Rogosin, Jamaica, Queens, New York, winter 1971-1972, Joan Fenton Collection, FT-1339, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

3825:16-26:34 of track 2 from a digital copy of cassette tape 8a, private recording of Reverend Gary Davis made by Ernie Hawkins, ca. 1968/70, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.
eighteen years fo I married another woman . . . It proved so deep it caused me might-near stand on my head an howl like a dog.”

Davis also told Harold he began drinking as a result of the marriage and once it ended, he left town for North Carolina. Mary instead took up with Willie Walker’s blind brother Joe Walker. Davis spent a few years in Asheville (and it has been argued that he was the model for the black musician that plays spirituals in the not-so-veiled description of Pack Square in Thomas Wolfe’s novel Look Homeward Angel⁴⁰, eventually making his way to Durham sometime in the mid-1920s. Between the two world wars, there was increased urbanization by rural southerners black and white, and Davis was no different. He likely settled in Durham for several reasons: the city’s tobacco industry offered plenty of money-making opportunities for musicians (something Blind Willie McTell took advantage of in Georgia, as well), and the Durham welfare department made provisions for both the blind and for street musicians, who could perform in the warehouse district and in the city’s “black bottom” at Pettigrew and Fayetteville, where African American patrons could enjoy cheap eating places, barbershops, grocery stores, a movie theater, a dance hall, and several poolrooms.⁴¹

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³⁹Davis, interview by Harold, April/May 1951, reel 1, side 2, pp. 7-8. Davis had assumed this other man was dead; Shoumatoff, “The Reverend Gary Davis,” Rolling Stone 98: 35.


⁴¹Neil Slaven liner notes, Blind Boy Fuller, 1935-1938 Remastered (JSP Records JSP7735, 2004); and Hugh Penn Brinton, “The Negro in Durham: A Study of Adjustment to Town Life” (PhD dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1930), 206-07. Brinton’s dissertation is an invaluable source for what Durham was like at the time Davis lived there, and I have relied on many of his observations and data in the following pages. As a term for black neighborhoods, the “Black Bottoms” in Southern cities were also characterized, rightly or wrongly, as place with rough reputations; see Stephen Calt, Barrelhouse Words: A Blues Dialect Dictionary (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 21.
A 12 July 1937 North Carolina State Commission for the Blind report indicated Davis had lived in Durham for twenty-one years, which would place his arrival in 1916 – clearly not the case. This date shows up as well in a statement signed 21 July 1937 by James Whitaker (presumably the husband to Davis’s future landlady Ella Whitaker), in which he claimed that Davis had been a Durham County resident for twenty-one years.42 Yet it’s only in the 1930 U.S. Census that a single Davis appears living in Durham. He is listed as a lodger on the 500 block of Pettigrew Street in a space shared with three other people, all originally from South Carolina: Lily Richardson, age 27 and listed as head of house, her sister Posie Paugh, age 29, and Lena Morris, age 49 and fellow lodger. The relationship between Davis and these three women is not known. A small scribbled word written to the right of “Gary” on the census form appears to be “Blind” or, just as probable, “Bland” – Davis had moved into future residence 410 Poplar with a Robert Bland and wife, who also had a case file (#7449) and were possibly disabled if not blind as well.43 Davis became part of the local welfare files beginning in 1931, the year his mother moved into an apartment at 410A Poplar and took a factory job stemming tobacco. Davis’s mother died in June 1934, and he found himself rooming that same year in a poorly kept and dilapidated house with a John King, who donated Davis’s rent.44 But in 1935, Davis was living at his mother’s former residence, 410 Poplar, where he would spend the better part of a decade renting a room from landlady Ella Whitaker, who

42Both documents contained in case #282, Spottswood Collection, Library of Congress.

43Case #7380, 1935 (month illegible), from Spottswood Collection, Library of Congress.

44Case #7380, 11 December 1934 and 13 December 1934, Spotttswood Collection, Library of Congress. It’s possible that Davis was already residing at 401 Poplar, which is the address given at the top of this chronological case file, though the description of the house from 1934 and that of 401 Poplar are so vastly opposite – one severely run-down and the other nicely kept – that the better assumption is Davis relocated to Poplar from elsewhere.
worked at Liggett & Myers Tobacco Company. Davis’s ally, John King, joined him there as well in 1936, paying his rent once again.\(^4^5\) Whitaker’s daughter, Mary Hinton, had a disability – a later report indicated a leaking heart\(^4^6\) – and was confined to the house, becoming something of an aid if not a friend to Davis.\(^4^7\) He later recalled that his bed was in the kitchen of the house, located in a residential section near the Mount Vernon Baptist Church, which Davis attended.\(^4^8\) Indeed, Davis slept in the kitchens of at least two residences, the one from 1934 and his more stable home at 410 Poplar, though the latter was in much better shape, described by one caseworker as “well-furnished” and “clean”:

“The living room contained an overstuffed suit [sic] covered with a gay cretonne, a piano, a radio, and a table on which was a bunch of red paper roses in a yellow vase. The house was very livable and several magazines and papers were on the table.”\(^4^9\)

Durham’s economy flourished, relatively speaking, during the Depression since the one habit people weren’t willing to give up, even in the toughest of times, was smoking.\(^5^0\) More affected were the region’s farmers, who suffered from a convergence of factors that included tobacco overproduction, depressed prices, a statewide shift toward

\(^{45}\) Case #7380, August 1936, Spotttswood Collection, Library of Congress.

\(^{46}\) Case #282, 10 November 1941, Spottswood Collection, Library of Congress.

\(^{47}\) Case #282, 21 July 1937, Spotttswood Collection, Library of Congress. Davis was also charged $3.50 a week for food and $2 a month for laundry when needed by Mrs. Whitaker; case #282, 12 July 1940.

\(^{48}\) Davis, interview by Harold, April/May 1951, reel 11, p. 7.

\(^{49}\) Case #282, 1941 (month illegible), Spotttswood Collection, Library of Congress.

smaller farm size, and increased tenant farming. Yet like all the state’s tobacco cities such as Winston-Salem, Charlotte, and Asheville, Durham saw substantial growth in the early part of the twentieth century as its tobacco industry blossomed. Between 1920 and 1930, the city – which was only 6,679 people in 1900 – saw a 139.6 percent population jump from 21,719 to 52,037 people. As of 1930, the majority (59.5 percent) of cigar and tobacco employees in the United States were black, which held true in Durham as well. Of all gainful workers in Durham in 1930, 53.2 percent of tobacco-employed males were black (1,336 of 2,511) and 67.5 percent of tobacco-employed females were black (1,979 of 2,932). The single largest group, in fact, was black females, who worked more than one in three cigar/tobacco factory jobs (1,979 out of a total white-and-black tobacco-worker population of 5,443). Prior to her death, Davis’s mother was one such tobacco employee, stemming leaves.

Tobacco factory conditions were harsh and the work was among the lowest median paying jobs at the time, usually between $7 and $25 a week. Leaf stemmers, for example, who removed the mid-vein of a tobacco leaf and who were invariably female,

had to stand all day. Their work was done by hand and paid by the pound (nine cents a pound in 1921), which resulted in an average income of $5.60 a week, typically the lowest paying of all tobacco factory work. Yet tobacco factories presented one of the few opportunities for unskilled black labor, which tended to be transient, working on farms during the spring and summer, and in factories during the fall and winter. The larger plants would shut down without warning when work was slow, letting the newer hires go first, which typically happened in mid-winter. This left the streets full of aimless people during the coldest time of the year, unable to make money until the spring and unable to keep their homes heated. Predictably, both family and social life suffered.

Adjacent to Pettigrew, which ran across the Southern rail line, were two of the city’s worst areas for housing, an area populated by rural transplants and drifters, with poorly paved and unpaved streets, unpainted, weather-beaten buildings and tenement homes, open drains, and few sidewalks and trees. Unskilled labor housing conditions were often deplorable. Families would typically gather around a small oil lamp or, if electricity was available, a single 25-watt bulb, though it might be turned off to conserve usage (this compared with uniform electricity in the skilled labor areas of town). A tiny oil, iron, wood, or coal stove would be used for cooking and/or heating. Homes with open

56 Ibid., 123.
57 According to Brinton, 107. Other jobs at a tobacco factory included bagging machine operator, cutting machine operator, stemming machine operator, drying machine operator, butt machine operator, cooper, pipe fitter, foreman, mixer, searcher, trucking, cleaning, blending, wrapper, packer, labeler, tie and hang, shape leaf, classify and sort, and helper for machine; ibid., 85.
58 Ibid., 99, 107.
59 Ibid., 119-20.
60 Ibid., 200-11.
grate heating were equally inadequate and drafty.\textsuperscript{61} Into the 1940s, four-fifths of the city’s black population still lived in substandard dwellings.\textsuperscript{62}

Vice and crime accompanied such conditions. Gambling and the illegal distribution and/or consumption of liquor made up the highest percentage of crime committed by male blacks in Durham, with nearly three-fourths of such crimes coming from the poorest, unskilled labor population.\textsuperscript{63} Pettigrew had the third-largest crime statistics in Durham, a 36.3% crime rate per 100 families, with the top offenses, in descending order of arrest frequency, being: liquor (drunkenness, driving intoxicated, illegal possession, transporting), acts on a person (assault and battery, assault with a deadly weapon, et al.), property (larceny, robbery, trespassing, et al.) and unclassified (gambling the most common offense on a list that included vagrancy and “gun on Sunday”).\textsuperscript{64} Given the rough working and living conditions African Americans endured in Durham, their death rates were more than twice that of the city’s white population, with tuberculosis the number one killer.\textsuperscript{65}

The one bright spot was the city’s black entrepreneurship, which got Durham dubbed the “Negro Business Center of the South” due to successful black owned and operated businesses such as the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company. It made W. E. B. Du Bois take notice, when he wrote in 1911 of a city already synonymous with

\textsuperscript{61}Ibid., 232-34.

\textsuperscript{62}Anderson, \textit{Durham County}, 372.

\textsuperscript{63}Brinton, “The Negro in Durham,” 3, 19. We must be careful in interpreting such data too literally since not all jailed blacks were necessarily guilty of the crimes for which they were charged.

\textsuperscript{64}Ibid., 8, 45, 48, 452.

\textsuperscript{65}Ibid., 265-66.
tobacco: “To-day there is a singular group in Durham where a black man may get up in the morning from a mattress made by black men, in a house which a black man built out of lumber which black men cut and planed; he may put on a suit which he bought at a colored haberdashery and socks knit at a colored mill; he may cook victuals from a colored grocery on a stove which black men fashioned; he may earn his living working for colored men, be sick in a colored hospital, and buried from a colored church; and the Negro insurance society will pay his widow enough to keep his children in a colored school. This is surely progress.”

Progress wasn’t as equitable perhaps as Du Bois surely hoped for, and for folks like Davis, life proved just as tough as elsewhere. Still, because of the discretionary income that accompanied the city’s tobacco economy, Davis and other blues musicians could make decent tips playing on the street. Playing with Sonny Terry, Blind Boy Fuller made up to ten dollars a day (presumably on workers’ paydays) playing at the tobacco warehouses, while Davis had earned eighteen dollars a week when traveling with Fuller. A good street performer, in fact, could often earn more than a performer in a club. We have one record of Gary Davis getting permission to “play guitar and sing in the colored section” for Friday 17 July 1931, though his subsequent busking was done

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68 Case #7380, 12 July 1935, Spottswood Collection, Library of Congress.

69 Sam Myers and Jeff Horton, *Sam Myers: The Blues Is My Story* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 35. Blind blues harmonica player Myers performed on both the street and in clubs during the heyday of the Chicago urban blues scene.

mostly under the radar of the local welfare authorities. Davis also recalled playing at parties, dances, and chitlin struts, though he didn’t play bars.\footnote{2:26-2:36 of “Talk on Blind Boy Fuller,” Rev. Gary Davis, At Home and Church: 1962-67 (Stefan Grossman’s Guitar Workshop SGGW 130/1/2, 2010).} Whether it was because he refused – which seems highly unlikely during the decades he was a self-professed “blues cat” – or because his music was too street-rough for a club, he didn’t say.

For a few years beginning in December 1934, Davis received a monthly $5 unemployment compensation, first through the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and then through Durham County Department of Public Welfare.\footnote{Case #282, 21 July 1937, Spottswood Collection, Library of Congress.} Beginning in 1937, he began receiving a monthly pension of $24 (which was reduced in 1941 to $20). The amount was barely enough to take care of his financial commitments at the place he rented – which included board and other essentials – and it must have been incredibly hard making it from month to month. As Davis commented to one caseworker (who noted the guitarist had not been able to buy new clothes in three years), “I don’t like dog food, and must have good food to keep my body well.”\footnote{Ibid, p. 2.} He was also constantly in need of proper clothing. Though he got a suit every Christmas from the Lion’s Club, he was nonetheless “naked” for clothes, as Mary Hinton told a caseworker, who wrote, “She said that his hat and shoes are almost torn to pieces.”\footnote{Case #282, 1941 (month illegible), Spottswood Collection, Library of Congress.} In 1935, Davis attempted to find gainful employment at a mattress factory for the blind, having been trained (in blind school, we can safely assume) to put bottoms in chairs and repair mattresses.\footnote{Case #55, 9 May 1935, Spottswood Collection, Library of Congress. Sonny Terry worked there for a time; see Bastin, Red River Blues, 265.} Whether
this was more of an appeal by his caseworker than any true interest on the part of Davis is hard to tell. In 1939, Davis expressed no interest in such work, though by 1941, he seemed to have changed his mind again.76 At this time, he was relying more and more on the collection plate generosity of the places he ministered, these churches typically filled with small numbers of poor congregants, and he mentioned to one caseworker that he did not make as much money preaching as he did playing on the street.77

It’s no surprise then that Davis tried to hide his financial income as a musician from the Durham welfare system for fear that the paltry stipend he received would be reduced or cut off. One caseworker wrote, “M. then stated that he is a Christian and he does not believe in this type of activity to earn his living.”78 Indeed, the oft-quoted comment in his welfare files was that he was more interested in saving souls than making money. And while there was no doubt some truth to that statement, Davis also seemed intent on not letting the Durham welfare system find out about his extracurricular activities. A few weren’t fooled, as in one caseworker who wrote, “I wonder if he might be playing around some times to pick up a little change.”79

In Durham, Davis encountered fellow guitarists Willie Trice and, most famously, Blind Boy Fuller (Fulton Allen), who had moved to Durham from Winston-Salem in 1929 shortly after he went blind and whom Davis ultimately took under his mentoring wing. Though impossible to fully assess, it appears that Fuller, the younger musician,
assimilated certain ideas as well as songs from Davis, including arrangements of both the bluesy “Mama, Let Me Lay It on You” and the spiritual “Twelve Gates to the City” (interestingly, Davis claimed Fuller mostly reworked Buddy Moss material for recording sessions).

Davis gave the lengthiest recollection of Fuller to Stefan Grossman:

I met his wife [Cora Mae] first. He had gotten away from her. And she come to my house. When I met her, when I first met her, I met her in the streets lookin’ for him. And I taken her home with me, you know, to my mother’s house. She had been out all night long and hadn’t slept any. And (I) give her my bed, too, so she could lay down and sleep. And uh, next day she happened to stumble upon him, you know . . . been out playing somewhere. He had got away from her. She didn’t know where he had gotten to. She was awful fond of him, fond of him, you know. She was crazy about him. She never would let him get too far from her, you know. I can’t talk too much about it ’cause you women, you all women know how it is, even if you ain’t married. When you get, when you run across somebody that you love, you like to keep ’em pretty close to you . . . So she’s out huntin’ for him. She stopped at my house. And she got up the next morning. Give her breakfast. And she happened to run up on him in North Durham somewhere playing guitar . . . He used to come around me, you know. When I first run across him, he didn’t know how to play but one piece and that was (with) a knife. And he had want to take some of my training. I sit down, and he’d come up my house every day and we’d sit down and play.  

In June 1934, Davis’s mother, who had been chronically ill for five years, died. Eveline’s death was so traumatic for Davis that he noted to Harold, “She rode across my mind ever time there come a hard rain.” Not only did he have to suffer losing his mother again, this time permanently, but he became the only surviving member of his nuclear family with her passing. It weighed heavily on Davis, truly on his own for the first time as he approached the age of 40. As he explained to Harold, he had been called


81Davis, interview by Harold, April/May 1951, reel 10, p. 5. When asked by Harold to describe what Death must look like, Davis simply said, “A dark, deep shower of rain” (ibid., p. 7).
to preach some time earlier but only took it seriously once his mother lay on her
deathbed. The story he shared proved a turning point in his life, a demarcating line
between the old Davis and the new – and note how his description eerily resembles the
nachtmara of Scandinavian lore, a demon that sat on a sleeper’s chest instilling a
suffocating, overwhelming feeling, i.e., the stuff of “nightmares.”

Davis: Came something in the room to me: I thought it was a fowl, or a chicken.
It got on me, and it was heavy. Look like I don’t know any thing I could bring
forth that was heavy as it was. It got on me and spoke to me and says, “I has a
message.” I bit it in the face, an it got off and began to act pitiful. I broke down an
commenced to cryin. While I was cryin it was a little boy came to me. Had hair as
long as he was high. Had a French harp in his mouth an he was blowin straight
up, singin this song: “I’m On My Way Back Home.”

I’m on my way back home,
I’m on my way back home,
I’m on my way back home.
Oh those of you have crosses,
Trials and temptations too,
But I started to go with Jesus
I am determined to go through.

Harold: Reverend Davis, was that a dream you had of the child who gave you this
song?

D: It didn’t pear to me as a dream. It didn’t pear to me as a vision. It peared to me
jes like I was natchel awake – jes like I am right now . . . It might very very
distressin for you to heah me say but it got on me[.] I don’t b’lieve there was
nothing I could find that weighed as heavy as that thing. Got upon me, almost
mashed the breath out of me. An the mouf of it: Had a bill mouf jes like a fowl or
chicken. It act jes like a chicken fo it jumped up on the bed. An the wings of it jes
as white as the drippin of snow. It said, “I hav e a message fo you.” I couldn’t say
nothing. It had done jumped up on top of me an mashin the breath out of me. I jes
grabbed it an bit it. On the jaw, you understand? It was startin to leave me. When
I commenced to cryin it wouldn’t leave me. I felt sorry after I bit it. I broke down
after I bit it.

H: Did you cry?

D: I reckon I did! Shouldn’t ast me did I cry! Oh shucks, look to me like I tried to
wash myself away. I felt it had come to me to as a message to tell me sumpin of
where I had left off in the startin of a life of Christianity. You understand. I had been called as a minister an I didn’t want to — well, there were things that had caused me to be careless. An the thing come to tell me it had a message. I never did receive the message, but the moment that I had surrendered I broke down in tears . . . I don’t mind telling you all you want to know bout this song.

H: Why do you feel that this song is so moving to you?

D: It seemed to hit me at the light I had mistrusted myself a doing: To please God. That’s why it dug me so deep. And it showed me a view of heaven. This boy was goin up singing at what I would lose if I didn’t go back home. This child was goin up where I would become to be, as that child was, submissive and humble. (Tears pour down his cheeks, out of his sightless eyes.)

A short time later, Davis received ordination at a Free Baptist church in Washington, North Carolina. Annie wrote that the year was in 1935, though 1933 and 1936 have also been suggested. A welfare file from 21 July 1937, however, indicates that Davis, who attended Mount Vernon Baptist Church in Durham, “was ordained as a minister two months ago at Washington, N.C.” which would put the date around May 1937. This latter date makes the most sense. His conversion, which certainly happened a few years earlier in the 1930s, would have preceded any ordination. Plus, Davis was still being pulled by his old musical ways at his 1935 sessions for the American Record

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82Ibid., reel 2, side 1, 1-5.

83Annie Davis, New York City, to Nancy Kubo, Boston, 29 May 1967; letter private collection of Folklore Productions, Santa Monica, California. In one interview, Davis mentioned “39” as when he was ordained, though the authors rightly question whether he meant the year, age, or years prior when he was ordained – see Richard Noblett, Stephen Rye, and John Offord. “The Reverend Gary Davis,” Blues Unlimited 25 (September 1965): 10. If we do the math, the only scenario from that interview which makes sense is the age of 39 at the time of ordination. This would put the year at 1935, which corresponds with Annie Davis’s timeline. Likewise, the alternatives don’t make much sense: the year 1939 would appear too late, while 39 years ago at the time of the 1965 interview would have made it an even more improbable 1926.


85Case #282, 21 July 1937, Spottswood Collection, Library of Congress.
Company, in which he provided a couple of blues on the front end of what was otherwise an entire week of solo religious performances from the guitarist. He also backed Blind Boy Fuller and Bull City Red on a number of blues at the sessions.

Incorporated in 1929 and located on Broadway, the American Record Company was bought out a year later by Consolidated Film Industries, “The World’s Largest Manufacturer of Popular Priced Records,” which was one of only three major record manufacturers by the Depression era mid-1930s alongside RCA-Victor and Decca. As its name implied, Consolidated built its business model on purchasing other labels and at one point had ARC (Conqueror, Oriole, Perfect), BRC (Brunswick, Melotone, Vocalion), and Columbia (Columbia, Okeh) all under its fold.

Davis’s ARC dates had been orchestrated by James Baxter Long. A Kinston, North Carolina, United Dollar Store manager, J. B. Long carried ARC 78s at his business and became something of a talent scout for the label after pitching two acts that won talent contests he had sponsored. Both recorded in August 1934. Country group the Cauley Family performed, among other songs, a broadside co-penned by Long, “Lumberton Wreck,” which was based on a true event that year in North Carolina (finding a musical act to record the song had prompted Long’s initial talent search). A few weeks later, Mitchell’s Christian Singers debuted for ARC and would become one of the more prolifically-recorded gospel quartets of the era. After Long relocated to

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87 Ibid., 368.

Durham, he took note of the musical talent there and in July 1935 brought to New York
and ARC the trio of Davis, Blind Boy Fuller and Fuller’s frequent lead, singer/washboard
player Bull City Red (George Washington, who took his nickname from a Durham
tobacco brand made by the city’s Blackwell company).

Davis and his Tarheel State companions arrived in New York City at the tail end
of a twenty-one-day heat wave. The infamous Harlem race riot of March 19, which left
several dead and hundreds hurt, was still fresh in the minds of New Yorkers, the Great
Depression was far from over, and the United States was seeking neutrality during the
rise of Nazi power, which many thought would be contained to Germany. The African
American press focused on Emperor Haile Selassie, Time magazine’s Man of the Year in
1935, who was urging the Ethiopian parliament to fight back against Italy’s power play
on the country (events that would lead months later to the Second Italo-Abyssinian War).
That week, the United States House of Representatives passed the Alcohol
Administration Act, which established the Federal Alcohol Administration to regulate the
alcohol industry two years after the repeal of prohibition, and a date for the third annual
convention for the National Union of Gospel Choruses had been set by its president,
gospel giant Thomas Dorsey. In the Big Apple, Joe Louis was gearing up for a fight with
Max Baer, Chick Webb was playing at the Apollo with Ella Fitzgerald in a weeklong
stint, and the second edition of Ted Koehler’s Cotton Club Parade music/comedy revue
was receiving rave reviews. Harlem, the “city within a city,” added new twists to its

89Background information culled from the New York Times, the Chicago Defender and the Afro-
American, including the following stories: “Untermyer Predicts Reich Religious War,” New York Times,
24 July 1935: p. 3; “Rain Ends Grip of 21-Day Heat Wave Here; Sustained Humidity Establishes Record,”
Is Back in Old Harlem,” Chicago Defender, 20 July 1935: p. 8; “‘Lemon Squeeze’ Is New Harlem House
Rent Plan,” Chicago Defender 27 July 1935: p. 8; “Cotton Club’s Show Is Plenty Hot,” Chicago Defender
famous rent parties in the “Egg Nog Sip” and the “Lemon Squeeze,” where the “shortest, plumpest person at the party” was donned in a “hideous yellow suit” upon which hilarity and squeezing ensued. It’s hard to know what Davis and his Southern peers must have thought of New York City, a far cry from even the urban bluster of Durham. They apparently didn’t venture much from the hotel room. Within a decade, Davis would be back for good, though.

In one of apparently several disagreements with Long, Davis felt that he was underpaid for his debut recording sessions, which were quite busy. He claimed he and Fuller each got $40 while Red got $35. Over a period of four days from July 23 to July 26, Davis was involved in twenty-five recordings. He was, in fact, the first to record, and gave ARC two blues numbers, “I’m Throwing Up My Hands (Ain’t Gonna Work Here No More)” and “Cross and Evil Woman Blues” (released as ARC 35-10-16 with titles likely given by the record company – Davis always referred to the songs as “Mountain Jack” and “Ice Pick Blues” respectively). Maybe because he had already been ordained (which he denied) or was a few years away from it, Davis didn’t feel comfortable playing blues, and the other songs he performed were religious. He recorded fourteen titles of his own, backed Fuller on seven, and backed Bull City Red on four. But Davis didn’t become the recording session’s star – his former understudy Fuller did, establishing a prolific if short-lived career with more than 120 sides to his credit at the time of his death in 1941 from pyaemia, a type of sepsis.

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90Grossman, Rev. Gary Davis/Blues Guitar, 12. Davis was not the only musician dissatisfied in his dealings with Long. Sonny Terry was rather bitter as well, commenting: “Long got us recording, you know, and at the beginning he got all the money. We didn’t care, ’cause it got us our start”; see Samuel Charters, The Country Blues (New York: Rinehart, 1959; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1975), 216.
By all accounts, Davis’s sides for ARC did not sell well, and he wasn’t asked back for a follow-up recording session. According to Willie Trice, the reason was that Long wanted blues from Davis, who only wanted to play sacred numbers. The nervousness Davis felt his first time in the studio didn’t help, as he had to be touched to know when to stop since he couldn’t see the recording light. Davis admitted to Stefan Grossman he didn’t enjoy the session and didn’t appreciate being plied with beer. According to J. B. Long himself in an interview with Kip Lornell, Davis’s vocals were simply too strained to appeal in a mass way to record buyers. While that may be, the excited, upper register grunts and groans Davis utilized were not so different from the street evangelist style of equally gruff vocalist Blind Willie Johnson, who had been a best-seller only years prior. Instead, it’s far more likely that Davis was simply on the wrong side of historical trends when he recorded his first sides, and nothing he could have done would have made his records sell any better.

The height of sermon-and-song “race” recordings was in the mid-1920s when artists such as Rev. J. C. Burnett was outselling even Bessie Smith, then-queen of blues recordings. Greenville guitar evangelist Blind Joe Taggart debuted in 1926, after all, as did Edward W. Clayborn, the Brunswick dubbed “Guitar Evangelist” himself, whose first hit, “The Gospel Train Is Coming,” was reissued through the rest of the decade due to its

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91Bastin, Red River Blues, 221.
92Grossman, Rev. Gary Davis/Blues Guitar, 12.
93Kip Lornell, “J. B. Long,” Living Blues 29 (September-October 1976): 13; quoted in Bastin, Red River Blues, 222. Yet Long was obviously enamored of Davis’s guitar skills, also telling Lornell that Davis “could play the guitar up and down, any way in the world”; Lornell, “J. B. Long”: 14, quoted as well in Bastin, 220.
popularity. By the economically depressed 1930s, however, fewer labels were in the music business, what labels were around had severely cut back production, the price of 78s had been largely halved, and, perhaps most important of all for someone like Davis, the record-buying market for the rough and ready street evangelist had waned. The 1930s was an era of increased urbanization for black America and popular music reflected the migratory shift, with tastes leaning away from the country toward the city in both blues and gospel music. This was the age of the gospel quartet, not the street corner preacher, and by 1935, when Davis was first recorded, he was something of an anomaly at least in terms of popular preference. Joshua White, Blind Willie McTell, and a few others had made some religious sides, but the downward trajectory was in place and by 1938 not a single gospel side by a guitar evangelist was released.95 Had Davis recorded in the 1920s, his music would have undoubtedly sold respectably alongside Blind Willie Johnson and others. Yet even when Davis’s two blues sides are factored in, one can see how the generally easy-going hokum-derived blues of Fuller would have been a more attractive musical form of escapism to a nation under economic malaise than the blues Davis offered, which was as serious and uncompromising as any of his religious sides.

When Long finally asked Davis back to New York to record in the summer of 1939, Davis refused, telling a caseworker that he would not have been paid what he was worth since Fuller, an established recording artist by then, earned $450 at that session and he was to have received $40 or “a possibility of $120.”96

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95 Ibid., 312.

96 Case #282, 11 December 1939, Spottswood Collection, Library of Congress.
Back in Durham, Davis continued to eke out a living playing on the streets, and in 1937 he stabbed a man who had swiped a dollar from him while he was busking. The man survived and no charges were filed. Davis also preached at several small churches in the area, the largest having less than thirty members. Around this time, he established what would be a lifelong friendship and occasional musical partnership with Sonny Terry.

Davis began traveling more frequently to Raleigh, where he had to report for aid and where he attended revival meetings. He was also wearing out his welcome at 410 Poplar. He was now being charged $20 a month to live (including room, board, laundry and haircuts) and was deemed “an awful lot of trouble” by Mary Hinton, especially since his smoking habit had nearly set the house on fire. In the early 1940s, probably some time in 1943, Davis met his future second wife, Raleigh resident Annie Bell McDowell.

Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold: We had just gotten to the place [in the interview] where you were boarding at her house. Was that your house, Mrs. Davis?

Annie Davis: You see, he travel all the time. When he would come in sometimes he would stop. I had a place people stop there, you know. You wouldn’t see him much. I don’t think he hardly stopped there – well jes comin in and out on his trips, you know. Raleigh’s a kina headquarters fur the trains, you know. He kina travelled, you know. He had to have a headquarters. He stopped there at my house. You know, I had six rooms.

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98Calt, liner notes to New Blues and Gospel.

99Case #282, 1941 (month illegible), Spottswood Collection, Library of Congress. Hinton also indicated that Davis would like to find work in the blind shop, suggesting her own desire to make more money from him or lessen her responsibility.
Harold: What were you doing there at the time, Mrs. Davis?

Gary Davis: She had a rooming house. Then she had day-work.

Annie Davis: I was takin care of boys was in trainin for barbers. Boys that was takin trainin to be barbers. Cause see I had six rooms. When he would come in sometimes he stopped a little while at my house because – really and truly we didn’t court very long. I met him in – we was engaged pretty soon to be married. He went away. Time we got married good I came to New York. My two daughters was here. I couldn’t git them back down South so I came up here. I left him behind at this six-room bungalow house. I an him was married then. So he didn’t like to stay there so he came on up here.¹⁰⁰

Gary and Annie Davis were wed 13 November 1943, according to a letter in which she copied the details of her marriage certificate.¹⁰¹ They were married in Durham, where Davis knew the three witnesses: James W. Whitaker, Mary Hinton, and a Mary Prince. Annie was going by the name Hicks, which was also the surname of her older daughter’s child. Since we know that Annie’s married surname was Wright, the use of Hicks suggests either that her mother had remarried at some point or Annie possibly had her two daughters by separate fathers. In the 1930 census, at least, Annie is a likely candidate for a Raleigh woman named Annie R. Wright, who was living with her husband Edward Wright (a hotel cook), and two daughters, Elizabeth A., 10, and Ruby, 5 (see Appendix 1 for argument).

Annie moved to New York first to take a job as family cook in the Long Island Sound village of Mamaroneck. Davis joined her three weeks later, some time in January 1944, and the day he arrived he almost got back on the train when he couldn’t get in

¹⁰⁰ Davis, interview by Harold, April/May 1951, reel 3, part 2, p. 1.

¹⁰¹ Annie Davis, New York City, to Nancy Kubo, Boston, 29 June 1970; letter in private collection of Folklore Productions, Santa Monica, California. I have not been able to locate the marriage certificate through North Carolina marriage records. December has also been suggested.
touch with his newlywed, who was in a church service. Instead, he was brought into a ten-night revival at her church. By April, the two made their way to New York City proper, where they lived in the Bronx (405 East 169th Street and then 3826 Park) for more than two decades, and finally Jamaica, Queens, where they bought their first house (109-42 174th Street) sometime in the mid-1960s from song royalties.

Davis’s decision to stay in New York was also personal – his wife had found work there. But other circumstances likely contributed. In North Carolina, his welfare check had been cut and he was having a hard time making money purely through his ministry. He was now in his late 40s and probably felt little desire to live on his own any longer, struggling on the streets that had already claimed Blind Boy Fuller. Also, the pervasive climate of racism that sent other African Americans north likely made Davis glad to escape the South. He moved to New York, after all, only four years before South Carolina politician Strom Thurmond would run for president on a segregationist platform.

The Durham welfare department got wind of Davis’s relocation and in a letter from March of that year warned, “You said that you will still call Durham your home. According to our policies, your home should be wherever you are living and not just where your things are stored.” His North Carolina checks ceased that December.

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103 Proof that Laurens in particular remains a hotbed for white supremacists, the town has housed since 1996 the Redneck Shop, which contains a Ku Klux Klan museum in the back.

According to another welfare department letter, Annie moved because she wanted to be close to her daughter Ruby, who was living alone in New York City.\textsuperscript{105} That and another letter indicated that Annie earned fifteen dollars a week (at 60 cents an hour, 25 hours a week) doing part-time domestic work for friends, her church, and referred clients, and that she accompanied her husband twice a week to the New York Association for the Blind where he was learning to make baskets.\textsuperscript{106} They paid twenty-three dollars a month for a three-room apartment they shared with a grandchild, Frances Hicks, 7, whose mother was in Baltimore, unable to care for her daughter with the money she made as a domestic worker.\textsuperscript{107} It was also noted that Davis wasn’t using his “mandolin” to solicit money on the street, and that he made anywhere from three to four dollars a month preaching at churches.\textsuperscript{108}

Davis preached at a Missionary Baptist Connection Church, where he was ordained a second time (in 1963 he also became an assistant pastor to True Heart Baptist Church in the Bronx), and he would make the Sunday rounds to other storefront churches. In his 1971 profile of Davis in \textit{Rolling Stone} magazine, Alex Shoumatoff described taking his guitar teacher to one such church: “It was a very small building in what seemed to be an unusually wide alley, but inside the cracked and stained ceiling extended far enough back that there was room for ten rows of wooden folding chairs, an

\textsuperscript{105}Case #282, 29 August 1944 letter from A. V. Jenkins, assistant case supervisor, City of New York Department of Welfare to W. E. Staniex (sic, Stanley), superintendent of Durham County Public Welfare, Spottswood Collection, Library of Congress.

\textsuperscript{106}Ibid., and Case #282, 5 June 1944 letter from H. W. Marsh, acting commissioner, City of New York Department of Welfare, to W. E. Stanley, superintendent of Durham County Public Welfare, Spottswood Collection, Library of Congress,

\textsuperscript{107}Tiny and James Robinson identified the second daughter’s name as Ruth; Tiny and James Robinson, interview by author, Brentwood, Tennessee, 1 August 2008, digital tape.

\textsuperscript{108}Case #282, 29 August 1944 letter, Spottswood Collection, Library of Congress.
aisle between them, a table with a collection plate, a large bouquet of red plastic roses, a lectern with a purple cloth draped over it, and off to the side a tiny room with a rusty sink. It was definitely a place of worship.”109 Storefront churches sprang up in New York City in the 1920s and 1930s as a result of southern migration and the growing appeal of Pentecostal/holiness faiths; specifically, rural migrants could retain a semblance of their Southern identity – the bonds of community and fundamentalist beliefs – in these settings, and by the 1930s, at least 150 such churches were reported in Harlem alone.110

Davis also played on the streets of Harlem, where he might make nothing one day, but anywhere from fifty to a hundred dollars the next.111 For the next fifteen years or so, this was by and large Davis’s professional life. He preached and he performed at storefronts, sidewalks, and squares, which earned him the folk revival moniker “Harlem Street Singer.” He didn’t always work alone and teamed at times with guitar evangelist Reverend McKinley Peebles (1897-1985), a New York transplant from rural Virginia of a similar generation and background who began his musical life as Sweet Papa Stovepipe before finding the Lord (like Davis, he too dusted off old blues and vaudeville tunes when he found a modicum of folk popularity in the 1970s). They met for the first time in Harlem ca. 1952 and performed together as late as 1970, when Peebles and fellow gospel singer/family friend Suzie Dews joined Davis for a concert at the McBurney branch of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA).112 Said Peebles of their initial meeting,


“I was selling snowballs [flavored ice] on the corner of 143d Street and Lenox Avenue one day eighteen or twenty years ago, and he was playing and singing on the street.”

If Davis was already hardened after all he experienced in the racially oppressive South, being up North was not much better. Even in New York City, busking was equated with panhandling or begging and was banned apparently from 1936 to 1970 – Davis suffered the brunt of this law and was arrested three times (1948, 1957, and 1964) for the crime of “public loitering.” He was also attacked, mugged, and had guitars stolen on more than one occasion. Said Davis of his hardscrabble existence working the streets of Harlem: “I had more done to me than anywhere I’d been in my life – you don’t have to go to sleep: you just sit down, and you’re outta somethin’.”

He recounted one such robbery in detail:

I was goin up the street. Goin up Lenox Avenue. Two o’clock at night. I’d jes left from my friend preacher’s house. Talkin. Two fellows overtaken me. Thought maybe they was goin my way. Ask me would I stop on a hundred an thirtieth street wid em. I thought it was all right. Jes good company, I thought. Then I stopped, got upon the stoop, you understan, an one of em started foolin round in my pocket. They have not git my money. I was turning too fast fur them to git that. Made me mad. Thass one night, if I’d a had me a pistol, I wouldn’t a been settin heah. I would a killed both of them. I could eat a nail I was so mad wid them. I didn’t never give up, you understan. I – I – They slapped me in the face. When I got that what I had in my pocket out I beat them to that, you understan. When I got that out wadn’t nothing fur them to do. He close it down on my

113 Gérard Herzhaft, Encyclopedia of the Blues, trans. Brigitte Debord (Fayetteville, Ark.: University of Arkansas Press, 1997), 197-98. The year Peebles first met Davis would have been at least 1952, which was when John Cohen recorded them together, on file as part of the Joan Fenton Collection, FT-1340, FT-1341, and FT-1342 in the Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.


fingers an hit me in the face. If he had ever got that near me I’d a kilt him. That
was a pocket knife, you see.  

Yet New York would soon enough be ready for the kind of robust gospel Davis
had to offer, thanks in part to a path paved by fellow guitar evangelist Elder Utah Smith.
Known for his gospel classic “I Got Two Wings,” the charismatic Church of God in
Christ evangelist had moved in 1930 from Shreveport, Louisiana, to the New York City
area, where he based his tent-and-church revival operations for more than a decade.
His showmanship, which included the rhythmic punch of his open-tuned electric guitar
and a set of paper wings, caught the attention of esteemed critic and classical composer
Virgil Thomson, who wrote about Smith in 1941, the same year he played a
Wednesday night coffeehouse series at the New York Museum of Modern Art – and it’s
not too farfetched to think that the sounds (and sights) of Smith helped open the door to
Davis’s own acceptance and celebration a few short years later by the city’s musical
literati and burgeoning folk scene, what folksinger/folklorist Ellen J. Stekert has called
“the 1950s liberal in-group” of folk movement figures.

In 1945, Moses Asch recorded Davis performing “Soldier’s Drill” (dubbed “Civil
War March,” though it would not be released for another twenty years), and in 1946

116 Interview by Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold, April/May 1951, reel X, p. 5.
117 Lynn Abbott, I Got Two Wings: Incidents and Anecdotes of the Two-Winged Preacher and Electric Guitar Evangelist Elder Utah Smith (Brooklyn: CaseQuarter, 2008), especially 37-56. Smith recorded his signature number no less than three times: in 1944 as “I Want Two Wings” (Regis 1004), and twice in 1953 as “Two Wings” (Ckr 785) and “I Got Two Wings” (Two Wings Temple 1).
Davis’s song, “Message from Heaven” (a.k.a., “There Is Destruction in This Land”), was published as sheet music by New York’s Watkins School of Music.\textsuperscript{120}

One vital relationship he established sometime after coming to New York was with Lead Belly’s niece Tiny Robinson. Shreveport, Louisiana, teenager Robinson, had moved to New York out of high school to take care of her ailing aunt, Lead Belly’s wife, Martha. Tiny soon met Gary and Annie Davis and ended up handling their business affairs for decades. Tiny and her husband, James Robinson, also made sure Davis was taken care of when he played on the street. Says Tiny, “We’d always go when it was snow or rain. We know where he was sitting, standing out on the street playing. And we’d bring him back down to our house, and we would keep him, and I would change his clothes, and iron them up and everything. We never let him stand out there in the cold.”\textsuperscript{121} Davis became part of the legendary picking parties at Lead Belly’s apartment and then after his death, at Tiny’s, where he also taught some of his guitar lessons. As she recalls of the down-home soirees:

Davis would visit Lead Belly on weekends, wasn’t no drinking or getting drunk. At parties were Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, brother Stick McGhee, Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Burl Ives, Josh White, Cisco Houston, Big Bill Broonzy, all in living room, all on floor and in chairs taking turns playing all night long. They would play those clubs, Café Society and all them places, and when they get through they’d come over there. That’d be like Friday night, and by the time they get done it was about two or three o’clock in the morning Saturday, and they would just stay and play all day. They would sit up in a chair, [sleep] wherever they could. Woody had the floor covered so he could sleep there. Somebody would bring a basket of chicken.\textsuperscript{122}


\textsuperscript{121}Tiny Robinson, interview by author, Brentwood, Tennessee, 1 August 2008, digital tape.

\textsuperscript{122}Tiny Robinson, interview by author, 1 August 2008.
These get-togethers may have given Davis entrée to the Stinson label, as he made his 1954 album for the label at the same time he was playing Tuesday nights at Tiny’s East Tenth Street apartment with Woody Guthrie, et al.\textsuperscript{123}

On a curious note: though there is no record of Davis ever having had any children, Tiny Robinson recalled that he had two estranged daughters whose names she couldn’t remember other than they didn’t use his last name. They were based in South Carolina but came to New York a few times in what were hardly civil visits – “One tried to stop Gary from playing something and he hit her with his guitar.”\textsuperscript{124} If they were from Davis’s first marriage to Mary Hendrix, which Tiny seemed to think, this might explain why both the marriage dissolved and why he had a less-than-friendly relationship with the girls. Davis learned, after all, that Mary had been involved with another man while they were married, and if she had gotten pregnant during that time, he surely would have doubted the legitimacy of the children.

Davis returned to Durham at least once, in the winter of 1948 when he attended a revival and stayed with Mary Hinton, now at 425 Bailey Street. While there, he fell on some ice and broke a wrist, which was x-rayed at Duke Hospital.\textsuperscript{125} The following day, Hinton called the welfare department seeking help. Not only did Davis have a hurt hand, he emitted a strong odor and had running sores on his legs, causing Hinton to wonder if


\textsuperscript{124}Tiny Robinson, interview by author, 1 August 2008. Adds Robinson, “I don’t know if Gary loved anybody too much. Gary wasn’t the easiest person to please.”

\textsuperscript{125}Case #282, two-dollar invoice, 23 February 1948, for a 9 February 1948 x-ray of Gary Davis, Duke Hospital to Durham Welfare Department, Spottswood Collection, Library of Congress.
he might be contagious. He had a follow-up visit at Duke ten days later, by which time his case had been handed over to the Salvation Army since Davis was no longer part of the local welfare system. He left Durham for New York before he could keep a third appointment at the hospital, where he had been tested for syphilis (results unknown).\footnote{Case #282, February 1948, Spottswood Collection, Library of Congress.}

As bad as that experience undoubtedly was, Davis’s musical situation had begun to turn a corner. He taught guitar ca. 1948-50 at Home of the Blues, a music school Brownie McGhee ran on 125th Street in Harlem from 1942 to 1950. McGhee called him “an extraordinary teacher.”\footnote{Tilling, ‘Oh, What a Beautiful City’ (2010), 11; and Sheldon Harris, Blues Who’s Who: A Biographical Dictionary of Singers (New Rochelle, N. Y.: Arlington House; reprint, New York: Da Capo, 1989), 147.} Davis also recorded a 78 rpm record in 1949 for the New York-based Lenox label – “I Cannot Bear My Burden by Myself”/“I’m Gonna Meet You at the Station” (Lenox 520) – that possibly had McGhee on second guitar.\footnote{A second guitar can be faintly heard on “I’m Gonna Meet You at the Station.” McGhee is the logical choice since he acted as something of a talent scout for the label and arguably arranged Davis’s session. See Chris Smith, “A Number That (Almost) No Man Could Number,” Blues & Rhythm 118 (April 1997): 7.}

Davis was next invited to perform at a tribute to Lead Belly, who died 7 December 1949. Held at The Town Hall at midnight on a Saturday, 28 January 1950, the concert was emceed by Alan Lomax and featured two dozen performers including Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, Woody Guthrie, W. C. Handy, Lord Invader, Sidney Bechet with Count Basie, Oscar Brand, and Pete Seeger and the Weavers (who had a Number One hit that year with Lead Belly’s “Goodnight, Irene”). Yet to be rediscovered, Davis was simply identified as a “blind singer from the Deep South,” though a writer for the
New York Times noted that he and Jean Ritchie received “heavy applause.” Future New Lost City Ramblers member John Cohen was in the audience and remembered Davis’s performance, which consisted of two songs, “You Got to Move” and “Marine Band”: “I was there and I was amazed by his stunning performance. I had never witnessed or even imagined such a guitar virtuoso before, and Davis played nimbly, evoking the human voice as well as a marching band on his guitar. Nothing was said about him in the program notes or in the spoken announcement that night.”

Davis didn’t remain anonymous much longer. Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold and Ellen Stekert both interviewed Davis in 1951, possibly in response to his noted performance at the Lead Belly tribute that Lomax had emceed. Several recordings from the 1950s positioned Davis to be one of the earliest pre-WWII players to be rediscovered during the folk and blues revival, launching what became an incredibly prolific recording career. In 1950, Tony Schwartz captured Davis in the only street-context performance we have on tape. Contained in a compilation of New York street musicians called Music in the Streets (Folkways FD 5581, 1957), the unidentified track (his blues rag standard “Twelve Sticks”) was recorded as Davis played on the corner of 6th Avenue and 46th Street. John Cohen next recorded Davis in 1952 and 1953, though the sessions wouldn’t be released until 2003 (as If I Had My Way: Early Home Recordings, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings SFWCD 40123). In 1954 Davis made an LP backed by Sonny Terry for Stinson, and in 1956 he shared a split LP with fellow Laurens County


130 John Cohen, liner notes to If I Had My Way: Early Home Recordings, 3.

131 I have not been able to locate the Stekert interview, but apparently Davis was less forthcoming with her than with Harold, telling Stekert, for example, that he only knew religious songs (Harold, in contrast, got a performance of “Cocaine Blues”); Tilling, ‘Oh, What a Beautiful City’ (2010), 14.
native Pink Anderson for Riverside, both albums overseen by noted folklorist Kenneth Goldstein. As a music director for Prestige, Goldstein also produced Davis’s defining trio of gospel albums for that label’s Bluesville imprint: the classics “Harlem Street Singer” (BV-1015, 1960), “Have a Little Faith” (BV-1032, 1961), and “Say No to the Devil” (BV-1049, 1961).\(^\text{132}\) Davis’s other album from the 1950s, 1957’s *Pure Religion and Bad Company*, gave folk audiences the first exposure to his vast secular repertoire and essentially ended the self-imposed ban on non-religious song he had largely maintained since his ARC sessions. Recorded at his home by Tiny Robinson and student Fred Gerlach (whose Lead Belly-inspired arrangement of “Gallows Pole” gave Led Zeppelin its version\(^\text{133}\)), the record was released on Folklyric (FL 125) and contained debut recordings of many signature numbers by Davis, including “Cocaine Blues,” “Candy Man,” and “Hesitation Blues.” Given the influence of those three songs alone on the coming folk blues guitar scene of the 1960s, one can say the cult of Davis starts with this record. Broadening his appeal, *Pure Religion* also became a turning point for Davis, who gained more club and festival work as a result of its release.\(^\text{134}\)

In the late 1950s, Davis’s live career also heated up, notably through appearances on the 1958 Carnegie Hall Hootenanny and the inaugural 1959 Newport Folk Festival

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\(^\text{132}\) At great as the results were, the sessions were marred by Goldstein’s desire for perfection from Davis. According to Lawrence Cohn, who was at the sessions, Davis became so frustrated, he grabbed Cohn by the coat, pulled him down, and whispered that if Goldstein “didn’t leave him alone and let him play, he’d break the guitar over his head”; Lawrence Cohn, liner notes to *Gary Davis Style: The Legacy of Reverend Gary Davis* (Inside Sounds ISC 0508, 2002), 2.


alongside Jean Ritchie, Odetta, the New Lost City Ramblers, Earl Scruggs, Stanley Brothers, Joan Baez, the Kingston Trio, Memphis Slim, and others. Between 12,000 and 14,000 people attended the instantly popular festival, which secured Davis’s place among a coterie of traditional musicians who would define musical authenticity in the roots-conscious 1960s.\(^{135}\)

Also in 1959, Larry Johnson arrived in Harlem from Georgia. The young African American musician was primarily a harmonica player until he took up the guitar under Davis, and his description of Harlem at the time speaks to the development of a younger African American energy and identity that made the “black heritage” of the elder Davis a dated fit once again (as it arguably had been in 1930s when his brand of street evangelism was giving way to the newer sounds of urban quartets):

> When I came to Harlem, Harlem was strictly black whether they’re from South Carolina, whether they were from Georgia, whether they were from wherever. And you got to remember, this was before Malcolm X got going, and before Martin Luther King got going. So Redd Foxx, Moms Mabley, all of them were on 125th Street in New York. I saw all the black fighters – the Spinks Brothers, Floyd Patterson. I saw these guys walking the streets, all the clubs was going. Sugar Ray’s was over on 7th Avenue, and all them sharp dressers was there; Nat Cole, I saw them all walking the streets, and I said, “Now that’s the kind of New Yorker I want to be.” That’s in my own age group. Now with Davis and them, that group, once I got serious I wanted to play that style or a style of that type of music, which we refer to sometimes as blues. Like I say, they was calling it Black Heritage then at that time.”\(^{136}\)

But Davis’s fortunes lay elsewhere, and in the early 1960s, Folklore Productions, which guided the careers of Joan Baez, Taj Mahal, and others, officially assumed artist


representation and song publishing (through Chandos) for Davis, bolstering his career and helping place songs with other artists.

His first notable cover came with “If I Had My Way” (a.k.a., “Samson and Delilah”), which opened side two of the eponymous debut album by Peter, Paul and Mary (Warner Bros. 1449, 1962), a number one pop record that year. The trio learned the song “firsthand, you might say,” according to member Noel Paul Stookey, through hearing Davis and Len Chandler perform it in Greenwich Village ca. 1959/60. A publishing ceremony over the song was so memorable it has become engrained in Davis lore. Amongst a group of entertainment lawyers, someone asked Davis if he was the song’s author, to which he replied an emphatic “no” [collective gasp]. He then continued that the song, like a number of his religious titles, was “revealed” to him [collective sigh of relief]. Thanks to royalties from Peter, Paul and Mary’s recording of the song, Davis was able to purchase two homes in the 1960s, of which he was quite proud. As he told Robert Tilling, “This ain’t no hotel, y’understand, this is my house I got from pickin’ that old guitar.” Davis and his wife moved into a brick house in Jamaica, Queens, as early as 1964, and he purchased a second home ca. 1970/71 in New Jersey that he used to get away from Annie’s daughters, according to Tiny Robinson.  

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137 Email correspondence between Noel Paul Stookey and Mary Katherine Aldin, Folklore Productions, on behalf of the author, 28 July 2010.


140 Tiny Robinson, interview by author, 1 August 2008; and 9 April 1964 letter from Annie Davis, New York City, to Arthur Gabel of Folklore Productions, Boston; private collection of Folklore Productions, Santa Monica, California. Many biographical mentions of Davis give 1968 as the year he and
Other musicians recorded and performed Davis’s songs as well, including Dave Van Ronk (“Cocaine” and “Candy Man” became signature tunes), Bob Dylan, Taj Mahal, and the Grateful Dead (“Death Don’t Have No Mercy” rounded out a number of live jams in the 1960s). Davis even shared songwriting credit (fairly or not) with Mississippi Fred McDowell when the Rolling Stones recorded a version of “You Gotta Move” that was blatantly indebted to McDowell’s arrangement of the traditional sacred song. In the 1970s, the most high profile covers came from the Grateful Dead and Jackson Browne. The Dead did a version of “Samson and Delilah” they featured on 1977’s *Terrapin Station* and performed more than 300 times live, often as a second set closer.\(^\text{141}\) Also from that year, Browne recorded “Cocaine” on his bestseller *Running on Empty*, one of the defining rock albums of that era. He cut it live on his tour bus with David Lindley on fiddle and added Me Decade appropriate lyrics penned by himself and Eagles member Glenn Frey, thinking the whole time it was a Dave Van Ronk song. As Van Ronk recalled in his autobiography, “I said, ‘Jackson, that’s a Gary Davis song, and here’s who you contact to send the royalties to his estate. Now get away from me before you see a grown man cry.’”\(^\text{142}\) The album was certified multi-platinum in 2001 by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) for seven million units sold.\(^\text{143}\)

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\(^{142}\) Van Ronk with Wald, *The Mayor of MacDougal Street*, 170.

\(^{143}\) See the Recording Industry Association of America’s website at [http://www.riaa.com](http://www.riaa.com) (last accessed 16 August 2010).
High-profile concert appearances by Davis included five at the Newport Folk Festival, Newport, Rhode Island (1959, 1964, 1965, 1966, 1968), three at the Mariposa Folk Festival, Toronto, Canada (1959, 1964, 1967), four at the Philadelphia Folk Festival (1961, 1962, 1965, 1969), and four tours of Great Britain (1964, 1965, 1969, 1971), the first as part of the American Folk, Blues and Gospel Caravan, a revue organized by Newport Folk and Jazz Festival promoter George Wein that also featured Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Muddy Waters, Otis Spann, and Cousin Joe Pleasants. Tharpe especially disliked Davis, who was a reminder of all she had escaped growing up in rural Arkansas, according to tour manager Joe Boyd. Yet by the end of the two-week tour, she had decided that Davis was “the deepest man she had ever met,” and she joined him on stage the final night for a rousing version of Thomas Dorsey’s “Precious Lord, Take My Hand.” Davis toured Great Britain three more times, and his arrangements of “Candy Man” and “Cocaine” became so famous in English folk circles that Robert Tilling noted how both “can be heard in nearly every folk club throughout the country.”

Davis’s Newport appearances culminated with his 1965 concert, released in 1967 as *At Newport* (Vanguard 73008-2), his first long-playing live album and one of only three released in his lifetime (there have been three times as many commercially-released albums).

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144 The tour was so popular, six dates were added to its original eleven dates; Roberta Freund Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues: The Transmission and Reception of American Blues Style in the United Kingdom* (Hants, Eng.: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 153.


concert performances since his death). Davis played the night of Thursday, 22 July 1965, and performed behind Son House on an 8 p.m. bill that also included Joan Baez, Maybelle Carter, the New Lost City Ramblers, and Josh White as the closer, among others. As argued in Chapter Three, his singing was rarely better than that night. Davis also performed a Sunday 10 a.m. concert of religious song between Maybelle Carter and Roscoe Holcomb.148

Among the many college concerts, workshops, and/or festivals that Davis played were Swarthmore and Allegheny College, the University of Pittsburgh, and Temple University, all in Pennsylvania; the University of California at Berkeley; the University of Chicago; Michigan State University; Barnard and Hunter College in New York City; and Brandeis and Harvard Universities in Massachusetts. He was also a draw at popular coffeehouses and clubs across the U.S. and Canada including the Gaslight Cafè, Gerde’s Folk City, and the Electric Circus, all in New York City; Club 47 in Cambridge, Massachusetts; Second Fret in Philadelphia; Boston’s Golden Vanity; the Purple Onion in Toronto; the Quiet Night in Chicago; San Diego’s Sign of the Sun; and the Ash Grove in Los Angeles.149

According to Roy Book Binder, who accompanied Davis on a number of road trips, travel came with specific instructions from Mrs. Davis: no greasy food and change suits on Tuesday. On the road, Davis would keep money down his long johns, rarely slept in bed or bathed, but also shaved and always wore a suit and tie.150 Sometimes he dozed

148 A copy of the festival flyer can be viewed at the Reverend Gary Davis tribute site at http://www.reverendgarydavis.com/newport.html (last accessed 16 August 2010).

149 Many of these venues are listed in Harris, Blues Who’s Who, 147.

on stage, sometimes he broke into moralizing banter, as the time he played the 1970 Berkeley Blues Festival and counseled that he “had come to ‘get Berkeley’ because he had heard about its troubles” before playing “You Better Mind.” Travel also came with Davis’s immense jocularity, which found the punch line in just about any situation. One time while he was dozing during an airplane flight, the pilot announced that they were cruising at thirty thousand feet. Davis jolted awake and made his own announcement: “Great Gawt-a-mighty! Thirty thousand feet. Jesus, we’re not staying, we’re just coming up for a look.”

Davis made several televised appearances, notably in a 1964 U.K. special, Blues and Gospel Train, which featured acts from the American Folk, Blues and Gospel Caravan tour, and Pete Seeger’s music program Rainbow Quest in 1967. Among other filmed appearances was an eleven-minute short from 1964 called Blind Gary Davis (Harold Becker, director), and the award-winning 1970 documentary Black Roots by director Lionel Rogosin, who also began interviews for a never-completed film on Davis at the time of the guitarist’s death.

Through his years of touring and musical acclaim, Davis never lost his zeal to preach, and would take various students on his Sunday rounds to different storefront churches. In 1968, he even made his way back South to attend the North Carolina Baptist

153 Rogosin interviewed Annie Davis at least four times for this project; 9 June 1972 and 20 July 1972 letters from Annie to Manny Greenhill, provided courtesy of Folklore Productions.
Convention, and at the time of his death was ministering at New York’s Little Mt. Moriah Baptist Church.

Davis also never abandoned teaching, and guitar instruction defined his musical legacy as much as concert appearances and recordings. He taught guitar most of his life, going back to the training he gave his brother and those who sought his skills within the Piedmont prewar blues scene, notably Blind Boy Fuller. This calling for music training (another form of discipleship) was likely rekindled when he taught at Brownie McGhee’s Home of the Blues at some point during the school’s final years.

Beginning in the early 1950s Davis entertained many guitarists at his home where he charged five dollars for a lesson that could last all day. Among the folk and rock luminaries he tutored to a larger or lesser degree were Dave Van Ronk (“the strongest single influence on my playing”\textsuperscript{154}), Eric von Schmidt, Ramblin’ Jack Elliott, David Bromberg, Dion DiMucci, Bob Weir of the Grateful Dead, Ian Buchanan, Jorma Kaukonen of the Jefferson Airplane and Hot Tuna, Ry Cooder, Rory Block, Taj Mahal, Allan Evans, Tom Winslow, Jadurani dasi, Barry Kornfeld, John Townley, Woody Mann, Alex Shoumatoff, Larry Johnson, Roy Book Binder, Stefan Grossman, Ernie Hawkins, Rick Ruskin, Colin Linden, John Gibbon, John Cohen, Fred Gerlach, Alex McEwen, Frank Hamilton, Joan Fenton, Alec Seward, Al Mattes, Dick Weissman, and Mitch Greenhill. Brownie McGhee’s instructional skills aside, guitarist Andy Cohen wrote of Davis the pedagogue that, “He may be the only guitar evangelist/bluesman to develop significant teaching skills at all.”\textsuperscript{155}

\textsuperscript{154}Van Ronk with Wald, \textit{The Mayor of MacDougal Street}, 133.

Though he never took lessons, a noteworthy devotee was Bob Dylan, who has called Davis “one of the wizards of modern music.”  

Best known as a Woody Guthrie acolyte, the young Robert Zimmerman explored and absorbed the music of a broad spectrum of traditional artists during his formative years, and his eponymous first album (Columbia CK-8579, 1962) included material by, among others, Blind Lemon Jefferson (“See That My Grave Is Kept Clean”), Bukka White (Fixin’ to Die”) and Gary Davis/Blind Boy Fuller (“Baby Let Me Follow You Down,” which Dylan learned via Eric von Schmidt – for a fuller genealogy see Chapter Three). Dylan picked up some of his Davis repertoire secondhand, especially through von Schmidt and Dave Van Ronk, but he was equally informed by seeing Davis perform live in New York in the early 1960s. The imprint of hearing the guitar evangelist during the height of the Greenwich Village folk scene has never left Dylan, who included two Davis-associated traditional numbers on his 1992 album Good As I Been to You (Columbia CK-53200): “You’re Gonna Quit Me” (with a line swiped for the album title) and “Delia,” both of which bore more than subtle nods to how Davis played them in regard to melody, harmony, lyrics, and guitar phrasing. Other songs that came to Dylan via the Davis canon (found on various bootleg tapes from 1961): “Candy Man,” “Cocaine,” “Death Don’t Have No Mercy,” “There Was a Time That I Was Blind,” and “Jesus Met the Woman at the curious spiritual summit that she recounts on her website at http://www.artofspirituallife.com/initiation.htm (last accessed 16 August 2010).


Dylan was such a fan that he was remembered saying in late 1961 when he had considered marrying Suze Rotolo, “We’ll get Reverend Gary Davis to perform the ceremony. Naw, he can just sing the ceremony.”

Davis famously welcomed any one who wanted to study under him. In 1967, a young, shy Roy Book Binder had been given a matchbook with Davis’s telephone number, which he finally got the nerve to call after a few weeks. “I said, ‘I’d like to take guitar lessons.’ He said, ‘When do you want to come over?’ I said, ‘Maybe next week.’ He said, ‘I’m an old man, I’m home now.’” When he arrived, Book Binder played “Candy Man,” to which Davis replied, “Good Gawt-a-mighty, you sound like Dave van Ronk!”

Davis liked to remark, “Bring your money, honey!” for those who wished to study with him (it was so familiar an expression, it was used for one of his album titles in the 1960s). Yet the hours of individual attention he would dole on a student more than compensated for the five-dollar admission. As he told Woody Mann, “You come to me, and I’ll teach you how to play, not fool around with the guitar.”

Skill level had little to do with whom he would take on as a student, and he would often provide verbal placards from the concert stage:

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158 See [http://www.bobdylanroots.com](http://www.bobdylanroots.com), a Dylan fan site maintained by Manfred Helfert of Mainz, Germany (last updated 6 April 2009).


Now all of you that wants – I don’t say you already don’t know nothing, I say you know something. All of you that want to learn my type of music, come to Thirty-eight Twenty-six Park Avenue. Right in the back there’s a little bitty, nice little hut back there, you know, where I live in. It’s a private hut. Don’t get, knock on the right hand door. Knock on the left hand door. That’s where I live. And, uh, if you would care to make known to me when you’re coming, call at o-seven-two-o-three-nine . . . Do that, will you please, sir, and please, ma’am? If it’s a sir, come on. If it’s a ma’am, please come on. I ain’t gonna – I’m gonna be nice. Thank you.  

Even at the height of his fame, Davis was willing to accept students, as in the following notice he gave before an audience in a 1970 concert:

Now any time that you all in New York and want some of my stuff, come to one-o-nine-dash-forty-two, Hundred-and-Seventy-Fourth Street in Jamaica, Long Island. My phone number: A-X-one-seven-six-o-nine. Call me any day and I’ll answer you any day. Come any day and I’ll, and I’ll set you up any, any day. If you, if you ain’t got what did you come with, come with what you got. If that’s nothing, come with that.  

In the 1960s, he had a business card that advertised “Eddie Outlaw and Rev. Gary Davis Record Shop.” Outlaw was a blind man who ran a newsstand with some gospel records on the back wall in the same building the Davises rented. A handwritten poster from 1966 also announced the joint venture:

OPENING Saturday, Jan. 13
DAVIS and OUTLAW
MUSIC CENTER
Guitar lessons given by Rev. Gary Davis
Guitars Sold and Repaired
Leather straps and cases custom made
Records


1630:19-0:59 of track 5, “Sally Where’d You Get Your Liquor,” digital copy of “Gary Davis at Buck’s Rock, 8-12-70,” from the Bob Carlin Collection, FT-4696, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
All work done on premises  
3807 Third Ave. Bronx, New York (near Claremont Ave.)  
Business Tel. 872-9506 Res. AX1-7609\textsuperscript{164}

Future Davis-style authority/instructor Ernie Hawkins was one lucky recipient of the business card. When he arrived, he found Davis asleep on a chair in the back of the store. “I didn’t know what to do, so I touched him and he exploded and started whooping and hollering. I ran back out onto the street and waited for him to calm down. I said, ‘It’s Ernie. It’s me. Remember I called you?’ He said, ‘Oh. Did you bring your money?’ I said, ‘Yeah.’ We sat down, and he said, ‘What do you want to learn?’”\textsuperscript{165}

In recounting his first lesson, which lasted four hours, Allan Evans wrote, “What made the experience profoundly moving was how a musician of his stature could patiently offer such kindness and encouragement to a near-beginner, leaving the impression that you were becoming his favorite pupil, a gentle way of introducing himself into your life as a musical mentor ready to assist you, inspiring you to do your utmost at all times, rewarding you with a smile when you played correctly, along with the privilege of playing along with him, joining on his improvisatory flights as you now accompanied him.”\textsuperscript{166}

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\textsuperscript{164}Card and poster reproduced in a letter from Annie Davis, New York City, to Arthur Gabel of Folklore Productions, Boston, 15 February 1966; private collection of Folklore Productions, Santa Monica, California.

\textsuperscript{165}Ernie Hawkins, interview by author, 8 August 2008, Fur Peace Ranch, Pomeroy, Ohio, tape recording.

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Hawkins simply says, “When I met him I felt like I was in front of Homer. Here was the blind singer.”

Grateful Dead guitarist Bob Weir never took formal lessons except for the couple of times he studied with Davis in 1971. As he explained in one interview, “I was a longtime fan of Davis’s and always really liked his approach to guitar, because he played the whole instrument and only used two fingers to play. Being blind, he didn’t know what you can’t do. Notes and lines just seemed to come at you in all different directions.”

Davis’s teaching method was simple. He would play a piece or part of a piece until he felt the student was ready to move on. He insisted on slow rote practice, parsing the details of a section of music till a particular problem was mastered, sometimes spending hours on a single musical idea. This approach was captured on film at the University of Washington in July 1967, in which Davis patiently teaches a young guitarist a particular phrase in “Twelve Gates to the City.” With little talking—and cigar firmly planted in mouth— he played note after single note until the student had grasped the idea. Given the proficiency his better students achieved on the guitar, this method obviously worked. It also suggests that Davis taught music the way he had been taught—through painstakingly routine practice. This was the process for many blind musicians, who have commented on the slow, repetitive learning curve in becoming proficient,

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especially if Braille music notation was involved. But, adds John Townley, “If he liked you, he’d slow it down and explain it, and if he didn’t like you, he wouldn’t.”

Alex Shoumatoff remembers that Davis would feel a student’s hands for calluses – if there weren’t any, he knew he had a beginner. In addition, Davis chose his material carefully depending on a player’s abilities. If a novice wanted to learn “Samson and Delilah,” for example, he would steer him or her to “Spoonful” instead. Davis practiced twice daily, which he advocated his students do as well: “Every time you pick up the guitar, play your lesson. Don’t play nothing else. Get your guitar in the morning about seven o’clock. Don’t ’low nobody to call you or nothing. I don’t care who it is. Then in the evening about eight o’clock till nine, you practice an hour.”

Davis was a true pedagogue of his instrument, not someone who shared a lick or two but one who had a full conception of what it meant to acquire aptitude on the guitar and who had the patience and knowledge to convey that aptitude to anyone willing to listen, watch, and learn. “I have no children, but I have lots of grandchildren,” he once told Ernie Hawkins. “When he was rediscovered in the nineteen sixties by all those white kids, it was the first time that he had people really, really, really listening to what he was

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171 John Townley, telephone interview by author, 8 February 2009, digital recording.

172 Alex Shoumatoff, telephone interview by author, 30 June 2008, digital recording.


174 Track 13 on Rev. Gary Davis: The Video Collection.
doing. And I think he felt it was possibly the first time somebody else could learn this. He tried hard to teach us. He tried really, really hard.”

Davis could also be a walking contradiction, and the worst side of his personality often got the best of him. Hardly a saint, he had numerous, well-documented “bad habits” including cigars, alcohol (he preferred bourbon with a piece of peppermint in the glass), an affinity for guns and knives, and behavior that could be unapologetically sexist as well as downright lecherous. He once commented that “God didn’t call no woman to preach. Nothin but a kitchen,” which earned the gentle admonishment of Annie, who retorted, “Oh yes, dear. I don’t agree with you. We haves a call fur sumpin sides a kitchen too.” He also enjoyed listening to risqué blues records by Bo Carter and others, which Roy Book Binder would provide him when visiting. One exchange recalled by the former student involved a particularly naughty record by Memphis Minnie:

Gary Davis: What was that gal’s name?

Roy Book Binder: Memphis Minnie.

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175Hawkins, Interview by author, 8 August 2008.

176Davis’s code for wanting a drink was to ask if he had a “phone call.” Roy Book Binder recalled one such episode at The Quiet Night in Chicago. Davis asked, ”Is there a phone call for me?” “And I said, ‘Let me go check.’ And I go up to the bartender, and I said, ‘Give me about half an inch of whiskey in this little glass.’ And I said, ‘Yeah, there’s a call, Reverend Davis.’ He said, ‘Long distance?’ And I said, ‘No, it’s a local.’ He said, ‘Well, I’ll take it.’” Book Binder, interview with author, 9 August 2008. In another incident at San Diego’s Sign of the Sun club, Davis trying to procure alcohol before the show from the club’s “den mother” Elizabeth Radiso. Recalls folk promoter Lou Curtiss, “He [Davis] told her he wasn’t going to go on stage unless somebody went out and got him some Seagram’s. She would have none of that. She said, ‘Now you get out there! These people paid good money to see you.’ He said, ‘You’re a hard woman, Miss Elizabeth’”; Lou Curtiss, phone interview by author, 3 August 2009, San Diego, digital recording. Even Pleasant “Cousin Joe” Joseph took time in his autobiography to recall Davis’s penchant for alcohol. On one flight to England, Davis sat next to Cousin Joe, who had brought a bottle of gin on board. Recalled Joe, “Reverend Gary Davis would say, ‘Muddy.’ Muddy would say, ‘That’s my pastor calling me. Whatcha say, Rev.? ’ He’d say, ‘Where’s the bottle, man?’ He wanted some of that gin. So Muddy would bring him the bottle and he’d take a hooker, I’d take a hooker, and Muddy would bring the bottle back”; Joseph and Ottenheimer, Cousin Joe: Blues from New Orleans, 163.

177Davis, interview by Harold, reel 4, p.13.
Davis: Where she live?

Book Binder: I said, she’s dead.

Davis: That’s the kind of gal you wouldn’t mind knowing, but you wouldn’t want to marry up with one like that. Oh, play that record again!178

This dissertation doesn’t attempt to explain let alone justify such behavior. Yet in trying to understand Davis’s demeanor toward women, it has been suggested that a lack of visual stimulation in the blind creates a lack of maturity in sexual attitudes as well.179 Also, he came from a generational era when racism set aside sexism as a social concern. While this wasn’t the feeling among more progressive African American thinkers and leaders at the time, the prevailing thought nonetheless was that the black women’s struggle took a back seat to the larger struggle of human rights.180

Given all the above, Annie was nonetheless a grounding force in his life. They were married nearly thirty years, after all, through plenty of rough spots as well as good. Writes former student Allan Evans: “Davis had found in Annie the incarnation of his faith, a woman of great devotion and modesty with a sense of justice and self-sacrifice . . . able to transform herself from a hard worker . . . into an artist’s wife, coordinating his itinerary, lessons and the many who sought him.”181 Very religious, very frugal, and very sharp, Annie needed Gary as well (she was older and he didn’t work is how Tiny


181 Allan Evans, liner notes to The Sun of Our Life, 18.
Robinson summed up the mutually beneficial relationship they had\textsuperscript{182}, and she lived to see her husband transform himself from a subsistence street player to an acclaimed concert draw able to provide the middle class comforts of a home and financial stability.

The last year of his life, Davis spent time in and out of hospitals. When students would visit, he would make sure they were still playing the guitar. And for female students, he also tested the bounds of propriety. One understudy, Joan Fenton, was never quite sure how much Davis was joking, recalling, “When he had his heart attack [in 1971] and he’s in the hospital, I go visit him and he’s got the oxygen in his nose and he’s sitting there, and he says to me, ‘Close the door. The nurse isn’t coming back for a while. Quick, get in the bed with me!’\textsuperscript{183}

Weeks before his death, Davis put money down on his own storefront church in Harlem, which he never lived to open.\textsuperscript{184} Davis died 5 May 1972 at the age of 76. He had left his New Jersey home with Annie in the car en route to a concert in Newtonville when he suffered a heart attack. He was taken off the turnpike to William Kessler Memorial Hospital in nearby Hammonton, where he died. A well-attended funeral service was held Thursday, May 11, at Union Grove Baptist Church, the Bronx, and he was interred the following day at Rockville Cemetery, Lynbrook, New York. A month later, Annie (who would live another twenty-five years), wrote to manager Manny Greenhill, grieving over the loss of her husband: “Well I am still sad over B. [Brother] Davis, it seems like he is

\textsuperscript{182}Tiny Robinson, interview by author, 1 August 2008.

\textsuperscript{183}Joan Fenton, interview by author, Davis & Elkins College, Elkins, West Virginia, 16 July 2008, digital tape.

\textsuperscript{184}Townley, interview by author, 8 February 2009, and Townley, recounted in Tilling, *Oh, What a Beautiful City*, 60-61. Given that the anecdote was told at Davis’s funeral, some embellishment may have been involved.
just away on a trip. The way I feel like he is away on a trip and will be back soon. May God help me to overcome him.”

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185 Annie Davis, New York City, to Manny Greenhill, Boston, 9 June 1972; letter in private collection of Folklore Productions, Santa Monica, California.
CHAPTER III

“I GOT FIERY FINGERS”: TECHNIQUE, STYLE, AND MUSICAL MEANING

Reverend Gary Davis liked to refer to guitar playing as nothing but a bag of tricks, and most discussions about him begin with that “bag of tricks,” a language on the guitar that largely came from two distinct traditions – pre-WWII Piedmont blues and religious vernacular guitar playing. Out of that disparate musical soup, however, Davis forged a highly personalized style, one that was singular in its instrumental complexity and which continues to distinguish him in the field of folk blues guitar.¹ As a Living Blues magazine writer noted not too long ago, “To this day, Davis’ playing presents one of the ultimate challenges to acoustic guitarists.”² Like other aspects of Davis’s music, his approach to technique was a combination of tradition and individual expression, the incorporation of regional practice with personal and practical adjustments, as well as innovative gestures and thought processes. This chapter will examine Davis’s methods of communicating his music: his right- and left-hand techniques and expressive guitar devices; his singing; his sense of style when compared to the larger field of blues and guitar evangelist contemporaries; and aspects of musical variation beyond melodic manipulation – of which he was a master – in order to show how context and structure also acted as platforms for improvisation. Because the mechanics of performance exist to convey extra-musical as well as musical thought, I have included several extended


discussions of meaning as revealed through the above architecture in his musical language.

That Davis could do so much with so little – an economy of motion and musical choice that became more than the sum of its skeletal parts – was at times astounding, not to mention the mark of a true master. As he commented to Stefan Grossman, “I sit down and study how to take advantage of a guitar, you see.” Indeed, just as Davis refused to be limited by his life situation, where his blindness instilled fierce determination and independence, so too did he refuse to be limited by the parameters of traditional guitar as it was practiced in the Piedmont.

Davis knew he had special abilities on the guitar, and he made sure recording devices were on when he had something to share. “Get this on tape,” was a common enough phrase directed to his students, as when he motioned to Stefan Grossman to record what was his only documented version of “Virgin Mary.”

“Rev. Davis was a competitor,” writes Grossman. “He wanted to be the best guitarist.” Not unlike other bluesmen, let alone musicians in general, Davis could be full of musical boast and bluster, telling onetime pupil Larry Johnson that “It won’t help you to play guitar like me, but it’ll help you to keep me in mind.” And upon hearing a newly


4Larry Johnson has even argued that Davis deserves the acclaim of a Segovia for utilizing the fretboard in such a comprehensive manner and consequently carving out a style uniquely his own while other bluesmen were more closely following the stylings of guitarists such as Blind Lemon Jefferson and Blind Blake. See Larry Johnson, “Larry Johnson on Gary Davis,” Sing Out 21/5 (July/August 1972): 5. Grossman concurs; see Rev. Gary Davis/Blues Guitar, 6.


7Johnson, “Larry Johnson on Gary Davis,” 5.
released album of his, he commented, “Now that there is some guitar player!”

Not surprisingly, Davis could be equally hard on other guitarists. He showed true musical affection for few of his peers, reserving his highest praise for Blind Blake though he also offered kind words on a few others, notably Piedmont contemporaries Willie Walker and Simmie Dooley (all blind).

Most were not so lucky, including his most famous protégé Blind Boy Fuller, of whom he offered: “He would have been alright if I kept him under me long enough.”

Davis also made similar claims about Brownie McGhee, whom he apparently taught at one point in the late 1930s, saying, “He did pretty well but he could have done better if he stayed with me. He got too fast for himself. You can strum along all you please on the guitar but somebody’s goin’ to ask you to explain it.”

When Roy Book Binder invited Davis to hear Son House and Bukka White play at New York’s Electric Circus, the reply was, “Good Gaw-ta-mighty, it takes two of them to pick the guitar!”

Dave Van Ronk recalled Davis commenting rather negatively about Blind Lemon Jefferson that, “Man, he couldn’t have sung no louder if someone was cutting his throat.”

Charlie Christian was good but “couldn’t get all the melody” since he played with a plectrum (i.e., flat pick),

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and in the case of Skip James, Davis “wouldn’t hire him for a dance.”\textsuperscript{13} As for John Lee Hooker, Davis simply interjected, “God knows how he made it.”\textsuperscript{14} Such harsh criticism can be attributed in part to Davis’s musical pride if not his sense of competition – he was vying with most of these artists, after all, for choice gigs and, ultimately, recognition, during the 1960s blues revival. Says Ernie Hawkins, Davis “was always aware that other guys, people like Lead Belly and John Hurt – were so popular. And there was some professional jealousy there.”\textsuperscript{15} Yet Davis’s criticisms were also grounded in the fact that he took his talent seriously – he practiced twice daily, for example, in the morning and evening. This need to be appreciated also instilled in him a level of discipline, akin, as he once noted, to taming a rogue dog. Subsequently, Davis arrived at a way of expressing himself on guitar that was truly apart from his peers.

Everything you hear me play, I try to play … for somebody to think about, you understand?. If you ever touch somebody, you can always get ’em to remember you. It’s just like a dog bites you, you remember that dog, you understand? And you’ll watch that dog, won’t you? You tryin’ to do everything you can to convince that dog, you understand? You’re gonna either grab a stone or have a prepared stick, one. When he run out on you again, you give him a taste of that stick or whatever you have. Just sit down and play music, there’s no sense to it. It don’t go nowhere, you know? You ought to play something that’ll go somewhere, that’ll impress somebody. That’s what I studied to do. For somebody to remember.\textsuperscript{16}


\textsuperscript{15}Ernie Hawkins, interview by author, 8 August 2008, Fur Peace Ranch, Pomeroy, Ohio, tape recording.

\textsuperscript{16}1:33-3:48 on track 2 of a digital dub of privately recorded tape (8a in Appendix 12) made by Ernie Hawkins, Pittsburgh, Penn., ca. 1968/70.
His execution on a guitar can be described simply enough. Davis almost invariably played the guitar in standard tuning without capo tastō,\textsuperscript{17} fretting with his left hand and plucking the strings with his right hand thumb and index finger, both of which were equipped with picks: a plastic thumb pick and a plastic or metal fingerpick, usually of the National steel variety.\textsuperscript{18} And here we might mention that the use of picks was essential to Davis’s sound – play his music without fingerpicks and you haven’t really played Davis. Not only does the use of fingerpicks create a loud and bright metallic timbre – perfectly suited, one might add, for street performing – but the pointed attack of fingerpicks allows extremely detail-focused playing; runs in particular can be executed with great clarity, and individual voices can be more easily emphasized within an overall texture. Yet the resultant presentation, efficient and logical though it was, could be baffling for the uninitiated who were, in effect, the “blind” ones when first confronted by Davis’s technique. Recalled Dick Weissman of trying to play with Davis, “I had to listen rather than try to follow his fingering patterns. This made me nervous, because I literally did not know what I was doing, but it also resulted in my playing beyond my abilities.”\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{17}Davis was recorded using a capo only once on guitar; on his 1935 rendition of “I Am the Light of the World,” he is playing the song in a C shape capoed up four frets and pitched in E. He did, however, have a capo for his banjo-guitar. See further explanation below.

\textsuperscript{18}Bo Basiuk, “Interview with Al Mattes,” \textit{Blues Magazine} 2, no. 3 (June 1976): 20; Mattes noted, however, that Davis would play without picks around the house. The National resonator instrument company has made steel fingerpicks since the 1930s.

RIGHT HAND

Davis’s economy of motion in the execution of his right and left hands contributed to the confusion: the sound of the music was much more involved than his fingers seemed to indicate. A lot of this came from his right hand and the brushing technique he used whereby his thumb or index finger would brush through or past an articulated note. The forcefulness of the thumb attack in particular made adjacent strings ring in sympathetic vibration. This, in turn, created something of a sonic illusion, a denser, at times busier sound than what the actual bass and treble string attack might indicate on paper.

That Davis used only his thumb and first finger to pick the guitar also lent to his less-is-more approach. Far from unusual, it was a common practice among folk blues guitarists regardless of regional orientation, and many, if not most, typically used only thumb and first finger to play. A few others, such as Piedmont prewar contemporary Blind Blake, used a thumb and two fingers (index and middle) to strike the strings, which could set up their own sophisticated picking patterns. For example, the central riff in Blake’s “Police Dog Blues,” requires an interrelationship among the right hand fingers (labeled “p” for thumb, “i” for index and “m” for middle) with the likely use of cross-fingering (a technique whereby fingers switch normal roles, as in the thumb extending over the index finger to grab a higher string note or the index and middle fingers reversing so-called “clean” fingering patterns). In this case, the right hand thumb in tandem with the alternation of two fingers best achieves the riff’s legato phrasing, made

even more smooth through the probable cross-fingering of the thumb over the index finger to quickly grab a melody note (the D-natural) within the descending scale.²¹

Finessed as it is, the result is still the same as in much folk blues on the guitar, a relationship of downbeat pulses in the bass (or sometimes the suggestion of such a bass pattern) against which a syncopated melody can be generated through a combination of pinched and alternating notes between the treble and bass.²²

Davis wasn’t so different in that regard, though the following explication of his technique will demonstrate a number of musical devices that were also largely unique to the Reverend, at least within the scope of traditional blues and gospel traditions. His innovative approach becomes even more remarkable given that he only used his thumb and first finger for right hand fingerpicking patterns. When asked about this supposed

²¹While the pattern can be played with straight i-m alternation or just i for that matter, the crisp accent of the D-natural supports the use of a thumb downstroke. In addition, the phrasing becomes much smoother a la Blake’s playing when the thumb is integrated into the finger roll.

²²Indeed, Blake switched back to more standard alternating thumb patterns for the body of “Police Dog Blues.”
limitation on his playing, he answered that two fingers was all he needed. Given the complexity of his playing, Davis was hardly flippant in his answer. Using only a thumb and first finger engaged the two in constant, accented dialog for Davis, who frequently made analogies to piano playing in his style, noting that pianists only had two hands to play while he had “three”: the “leading” left hand and the forefinger and thumb of the “striking” hand. Indeed, Davis could imply up to three voices at once in certain songs such as “Candy Man,” where he simultaneously created a bass line, a treble melody line, and an inner-voice riff (a G-A dyad ostinato) that evoked a countermelody (and on occasions when he sang the song, a fourth voice, or layer, emerged as well). His use of a reverse bass (elaborated below) only added to the aural excitement.

Example 3.2. Reverend Gary Davis, “Candy Man,” CD track time 0:22-0:32. From The Guitar & Banjo of Reverend Gary Davis (Prestige/Folklore OBCCD-592-2, 2001); original recording 1964.

The alternating patterns of thumb and first finger also allowed for rapid-fire runs like that of a lutenist, as in the quick bass string rolls of “Twelve Gates to the City.”

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24 Ibid., 14.

Davis’s thumb and first finger in rapid alternation could even suggest a flamenco-worthy tremolo, as in the musical flourish he often used at the end of “Sally, Where’d You Get Your Liquor From?”

Having only the thumb and first finger available necessitated as well that the thumb do more work than simply supply the stride piano-like bass lines found in much East Coast prewar blues guitar. Without a second finger to strike certain notes, Davis’s thumb had to overcompensate, either through consecutive thumb or first finger articulations – pushing through the notes, as it were – or interacting in coordinated cross-fingerings with the index finger to keep both melody and bass going. This approach, far from limiting, creates a built-in syncopated attack on the strings that activates the aesthetic language of ragtime on guitar. In a song such as “Buck Rag,” which was one of Davis’s signature instrumentals, everything is pushed forward as a result of the constant interaction and cross relationships between thumb and first finger, a motoric energy and highly syncopated rhythm that supports Willie Trice’s observation that Davis “never let a string be still.”

This approach found a tantalizing extreme in certain songs where Davis switched the role of the thumb, giving the downbeat to the higher strings and the upbeat to the

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lower strings. Indeed, it’s worth considering the influence of his early banjo playing in the development of this trait, where the high G string of the five-string banjo was executed as a downstroke by the thumb (normally the reserve of bass patterns) but sounded as part of the melody. Normally in alternating bass patterns, the thumb strikes the lower strings on beats one and three but accenting beats two and four on higher strings as in the typical C patterns that follow:

Davis sometimes did the opposite, a reverse bass pattern that placed the lower bass note on beats two and four replete with normal accents on those beats as in the following.

Davis used this technique in a number of songs, most of them in C such as “Cocaine Blues,” “I Am the True Vine,” “Pure Religion,” and “You Got the Pocket Book, I Got the Key,” as well as the G tune “Lost Boy in the Wilderness” (a likely guitar interpolation of the 1928 Victor 78 “Lost Boy Blues” by harpist Palmer McAbee).

Davis’s most famous example, however, was the above-cited “Candy Man,” a tune that perplexed its most notable acolyte, Dave Van Ronk, who claimed to have finally learned it from Davis in a dream several years after he had died.26

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26Van Ronk, Mayor of McDougal Street, 140. Ronk, who didn’t realize the term’s euphemistic use for a pimp, thought “Candy Man” was a children’s song, to which Davis replied, “Yeah, you get lots of children from songs like that,” 135.
Musically, the effect was akin to applying a kind of meta-syncopation over an entire tune, a constant forward momentum and push against the preconceived pulse that sounded fresh and interesting to the listener without the need for much overt variation. Indeed, it was a device he likely honed as a young man having to play hours on end at parties and rural dances. Davis, who also performed “Candy Man” in waltz and two-step versions, admitted as much to Stefan Grossman, telling the guitarist that he could play the tune all night at a party merely by switching up the rhythm to match current dance steps.27

Still, the off-beat patterns could make it difficult for other musicians to follow, as Van Ronk wryly observed, and so an equally persuasive explanation for the rhythmic complexity was that he enjoyed showing other players who the real master was, especially in a “simple” song such as “Candy Man,” which threw many a picker off the musical rails during the final four phrases of the 16-bar tune. There, Davis would often pick the song straight, giving the appearance that an extra note had been added, or, as in the following example, maintaining its asymmetrical quality to the very end only to resolve the downbeat issue in the final pickup notes leading to the cadence.


Davis claimed numerous times that the song was a carnival number circa 1905, observing in one case: “That come out in 1905. Everybody you see with a guitar try to play ‘Candy Man,’ you know … Come out in a carnival show.”28 In another instance, he said he had learned the song a few years after the fact from fellow Greenville string band member Will Bonds.29 Yet Davis also told Ernie Hawkins he learned it from a medicine show, noting that the best guitar players came from that environment. The song, with lyrics that place it in New Orleans, certainly got around, and Tylertown, Mississippi, guitarist Jewell “Babe” Stovall (1907-1974) played a similar if less intricate ragtime arrangement of it that shared textual and musical elements with Davis’s.30 Regardless of its provenance, the song’s tricky execution by Davis made it a tough act to follow. “It’s


30See “Candy Man” on Babe Stovall, The Old Ace: Mississippi Blues and Religious Songs (Arcola Records 1005, 2003). John Hurt’s same-named tune, on the other hand, shared little with either that by Stovall or Davis.
an example of [Davis’s] brilliant sense of humor,” says Hawkins, “Plus, here’s a song nobody else can play – the simplest sounding song in the repertoire and no one can play it but him.”³¹

In a groundbreaking survey of thumb patterns among folk-blues guitarists, Andrew M. Cohen finds that Davis meets the norm of East Coast players, who tended to favor the use of alternating thumb patterns and an “extended” thumb, where space between thumb and the first finger is at something of a ninety-degree angle (in contrast to “stacked,” where the first finger sits directly below the thumb, and “lutiform,” the lute-like technique of extending the first finger out beyond the thumb).³² The extended thumb in turn creates the right environment for playing alternating bass patterns, whereby enough spatial separation exists between the thumb and first finger to allow interdependent activity on the bass and melody planes of the guitar’s six strings. As any classical guitarist will state, an extended thumb achieves the physiology needed to execute distinct, simultaneous melodic and bass activity, which Davis and his Piedmont blues-rag peers did in a more pronounced way than most Deep South and Texas players, who relied more on repetitious bass patterns on a single string (a.k.a., “dead thumb”) or intermittent bass string usage (a.k.a., “utility thumb”).³³

Certain techniques are largely absent from Davis’s right-hand approach. He used very little palm muting, a sonically-layered feel that other guitarists such as Robert

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³¹Hawkins, interview by author, 8 August 2008.


³³Ibid., 168-70. This observation holds true in general although an artist such as Blind Lemon Jefferson could also achieve heights of East Coast-worthy counterpoint as his “Black Horse Blues” amply demonstrates.
Johnson employed, which was achieved by placing the flesh of the right-hand palm against the bass strings when striking them to create a muted sound against the openly resonant top strings. Davis also used the “drop-thumb” anticipated beat to a much lesser extent than someone like Blind Blake, who made it part of his regular expressive arsenal. In part, I suspect this was because it is a more difficult maneuver to achieve with a thumb pick, which Davis always wore (though the technique showed up occasionally as in “Talk on the Corner” or “Twelve Gates to the City”).

One further note about Davis’s right hand: his thumb pick was forced unusually high onto the digit behind the first knuckle (the proximal interphalangeal joint). Yet his extreme placement was smart and practical. For one thing, it better employed the full palm muscle which in turn enabled more power from the right hand and consequently more volume, a concern given the type of street playing he did most of his life where the limited dynamic range of a guitar would have had to compete with other sounds and distractions in order to be heard. Placing the pick where he did would have also kept it from slipping off the thumb, which no blind musician would want to happen when playing on the street, where the pick likely would never be retrieved if it fell off. Thumb pick firmly in place, Davis had the additional advantage of being able to flip the direction of his plucking from time to time, treating the thumb pick almost as a plectrum with a combination of down and up strokes, as in a methodically slow version of “Twelve Gates to the City” in which the filmed guitarist can be seen moving his thumb down and up for one scalar passage – the up stroke serving to return Davis’s thumb to the sixth string for the downbeat.

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34 You can especially see his thumb pick placement during a televised performance of “Children of Zion” for Pete Seeger’s *Rainbow Quest*; see track 3, *Rev. Gary Davis: The Video Collection* (Vestapol 13111, 2008), DVD.

Finally, with the thumb pick placed that far back, it didn’t get in the way when he needed to make the many percussive effects he favored, from hand claps and thumb-and-finger snaps to golpe and tambora.

Like classical and flamenco guitarists, Davis employed plenty of pitched and unpitched effects on his instrument including golpe (striking the wood body of the guitar at various places for percussive effect) and tambora (striking the strings in a percussive manner, typically near the bridge with the side of the palm or thumb, so that the strings resonate at once with a pitched and non-pitched quality). This latter technique was even used by Davis in a similar fashion as classical guitarists, i.e., for timbral variety at the end of a phrase or section.35 Among other expressive devices used by Davis in this regard were imitative vocal effects via fret-glissandi; snap pizzicati; and hammer-ons and pull-offs by the left hand sans plucking while the right hand is snapping fingers or hitting the rib of the guitar in percussive counterpoint. Perhaps the best example is “Samson and Delilah,” where nearly all of the above devices culminated in a song as aggressively

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athletic as the subject himself. See the discussion on “Buck Rag” elsewhere for another demonstration of Davis’s percussive vocabulary.\(^\text{36}\)

\(^{36}\)For thoughts on Davis’s thumb and overall technique, see especially Dean Meredith, “Reverend Gary Davis Guitar Style” *Blues Magazine* 2, no. 2 (April 1976): 32-34.
Comparing Davis’s use of the above expressivity to classical guitar is not to say that folk guitar was otherwise devoid of such ideas. The use of contrastive timbres and the exploration of all tonal possibilities on an instrument – including the non-melodic –
are among the guiding aesthetic principles, after all, for what Olly Wilson has called the “heterogeneous sound ideal” in the music of Africa and the Afro-Diaspora,\(^{37}\) where instruments might be equipped with vibrating, percussive modifiers such as the metal spoke and rings typically attached to the necks of Moroccan Gnawan gunbris or the various buzzing shells and bottle tops added to African lamellophones. Davis didn’t play his guitar so much as inhabit the guitar, strumming, hitting, tapping, slapping and coaxing every possible sound from it, melodic and otherwise. He called his guitar “Miss Gibson,” and the anthropomorphic analogy was fitting – his guitar was witness and companion, ready to express not just beauty but the fullness of life through song.

**LEFT HAND**

Davis’s left hand was just as economical and yet dexterous as his right hand. In a video from 1967, he demonstrated how to play “Twelve Gates to the City,” and the way he would casually flop his hands down on the fretboard would seem to belie the kind of nuanced execution for which he was famous. In the film, Davis slides into his open position A chord not by simply sliding his first finger up one fret like another guitarist might, but by hammering on from a first finger-first fret position with his second and third fingers (the left-hand middle finger grabbing both the fourth and third strings). It was an eccentric solution, perhaps, but one that also served to delineate the areas of melodic activity (treble and bass) tucked within such parallel chord movement.\(^{38}\) This

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\(^{38}\)See from 49:55, “Twelve Gates to the City” on Rev. Gary Davis: The Video Collection.
solution also allowed Davis to grab a melody note with his fourth finger through a stylized hinge barre that maintained a sense of harmony under the melody, even when musical events were stacked vertically within the same fret. This was the case, for example, when he played the tonic sixth chord in “Maple Leaf Rag,” where such coordination also ensured a sense of legato phrasing in the top voice through the enlistment of the little finger as a guide finger able to shift from the fifth to second frets with melodic ease.

Example 3.8. Reverend Gary Davis, “Maple Leaf Rag.” DVD track time 37:16-37:19. From Rev. Gary Davis: The Video Collection (Vestapol 13111, 2008); original recording 1967. Roman numerals and superscripts respectively indicate fret and number of strings being barred. Arabic numbers on staff indicate which left hand fingers are used to fret a note, and in tablature which fret is played on a given string.

In recalling the time he heard Davis play, blues scholar Jeff Todd Titon noted how the guitarist played with unorthodox mastery compared to other guitarists of the folk and blues revival:

I sat about three feet away from him at a party after his concert and watched him play for a couple of hours. His album The Guitar and Banjo of Reverend Gary Davis was one of my favorites, and I was in awe of his ability on the guitar to play those ragtime pieces. I’d never seen him in person though, and so I thought maybe I could learn something – I played blues guitar – but I wasn’t prepared to recognize all of his chord formations way up on the fingerboard, so it was both
wonderful and frustrating to see him do what I’d heard on his records. Whereas I could watch John Hurt or Son House and figure out what they were doing by looking and hearing, with Gary Davis I just wasn’t prepared to understand what he was doing with his left hand.\textsuperscript{39}

The way Davis conceived of left-hand functions can be thought of in terms of horizontal and vertical patterns.

Vertically, he used a fair number of open-position chord voicings, as in all the music he played in the key of C (invariably played with the G as the lowest note in second-inversion pedal-tone fashion). One difference from his peers was the thickness of Davis’s harmonies, which he executed by bringing his left hand thumb over not only the sixth string but the fifth string as well, doubling the fifth and/or seventh scale degrees of the chord in the process. A G dominant seventh in open position for example, as in “O Lord, Search My Heart,” employed only one open string and was spelled from bass to treble as G-B-F-G-D-F (see Example 3.9 below for illustrations/fingerings of the following). This compared to the normal spacing of G-B-D-G-D(or B)-F, which would have two or three open strings. A C dominant seventh was even more unusual, made with no open strings (thereby making it a first position chord), spelled from bass to treble as G-C-E-Bb-C-G – and note that the only way to achieve such a chord is by having the left hand thumb reach over the neck and fret both the sixth and fifth strings! But Davis also ventured from the safety of open position more than his contemporaries did, blind or otherwise, to the extent that he devised his own upper fretboard language, often played in partial barre shapes that incorporated bass notes into the texture (Davis, interestingly, did not use full barre shapes where the first finger grabs all six strings). In part, his upper fingerboard fretting came out of ideas he established in open and first position playing.

\textsuperscript{39}Jeff Todd Titon, correspondence with author, 19 Feb 2009.
The entirely fretted configuration of the above-mentioned C dominant seventh chord, for example, made it easy to transpose that same left hand relationship up the neck, which he did with frequency, especially for a D dominant seventh at the third fret and G dominant seventh at the eighth fret.

Example 3.9. Typical dominant seventh chord figures as played by Reverend Gary Davis. An asterisk (*) indicates use of the left hand thumb to fret the sixth and fifth strings.

Other extended left hand shapes made by Davis are less the language of folk guitar than that of classical guitar, specifically D-shaped triads with a fretted root added by the left hand first finger that Davis could move up the neck to make, for example, G and C chords, and harmonically rich A and D shapes with a doubled third and the left hand fourth finger extended to fret a bass root note.

Example 3.10. Some typical triadic chord shapes as played by Reverend Gary Davis.
Such patterns not only provided a full, robust sound, one that incorporated up to six fretted strings, but created chordal shapes out of which Davis could arpeggiate rhythmic and melodic figures with ease.

This preference for fullness of texture got no better workout than in G, where Davis usually applied the same clutched chord he used for a first-position F chord but in third position combined with additional clutched movement up the neck. In examining seventy-one of Davis’s songs in G (see Appendix 5), fifty-five, or 77%, employ primary use of third position for the tonic G chord plus the requisite clutched shapes and harmonic fingerings that surround G built from the third fret. This number changes dramatically, however, when secular and sacred repertoires are split – 42 clutched/4 open for sacred; 13 clutched/12 open for secular – meaning nearly half of Davis’s secular material in G was played from an open position compared to only 8.7% of his sacred songs. This suggests that Davis as a young musician began playing in open position much like other Piedmont prewar secular guitarists, and, indeed, this is how he played such standard East Coast fare in G as “Mama, Let Me Lay It on You,” “That’ll Never Happen No More,” and “Lost John.” Consequently, we can conclude that his use of clutched chords up the neck developed as he became more and more a gospel performer, that gospel music and the urban fabric of gospel music as it was developing around the time of his conversion, in fact, allowed Davis’s technique to progress beyond the patterns of Piedmont blues, in which he was also well-schooled. While that may not be much to go on, it is worth noting that Davis’s one song in G at his 1935 sessions, “O Lord, Search

40The remaining three songs in G, also religious and likely played from third position, come via sheet music with words and melody only from Stefan Grossman, Rev. Gary Davis/The Holy Blues (New York: Robbins Music, 1970), and as such were not counted in the above final tally.
My Heart,” was played in open and first position, clutched shapes up the neck not appearing until a decade later when he recorded “Soldier’s Drill” in F and then in the early 1950s, when various songs in third position G were played for John Cohen, most notably Davis’s first recording of “Samson and Delilah” (and even if we take into account Sonny Terry’s recollection that Davis was playing “Samson and Delilah” in Durham in the late 1930s, it still corresponds to a timeline consistent with his religious conversion).

Davis’s expansive use of the guitar fretboard confirmed Willie Trice’s comment that “While you were playing one chord, Davis would play five.” On a technical level, it allowed Davis to provide constant harmonic accompaniment – or at the very least, the suggestion of a harmonic foundation – even as he moved melodically up the fretboard. And in this regard, Davis arguably played more like a jazz guitarist, something that both Stefan Grossman and Ernie Hawkins have asserted about Davis’s improvisatory skill. Says Hawkins: “The Twenties was the Jazz Age, and if you listen to Louis Armstrong, if you play ‘Oriental Strut,’ it’s all Gary Davis runs. Louis Armstrong was playing the same arpeggios that Gary Davis was playing. Now Gary probably listened to Louis. Everybody did.”


44Hawkins, interview by author, 8 August 2008.
A good example of Davis’s fretboard command was his gospel number, “Goin’ to Sit on the Banks of the River.” Riding over a gapped scale in the treble voice (G-A-B-C-D-F#), Davis provided harmonic underpinnings at every melodic turn through the combination of open and fretted strings (see tablature translation) that traversed the guitar neck from open-position voicings to an eighth position G7 involving the fretting of all six strings – the two bass strings held down by the left hand thumb. In fact, very little of what Davis played, despite much of it residing in the tonic, involves open strings. Rather, Davis used his own version of the modern CAGED system for improvising on guitar to find chord shapes under whatever note happened to be in the treble voice, even at the upper reaches of the fretboard. While his execution was skeletal at times – the plucking of parallel octaves throughout the piece, for example – the result sounded much fuller. Those same parallel octaves become parallel sixths, as in the opening pick-up notes, due to the force of the right hand thumb brushing into the next string. Adding to the aural interest, Davis would also syncopate his lines and even harmonies, often anticipating a coming chord, as in m. 10’s push to the tonic while sitting on the subdominant.

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45 The CAGED system takes the five basic major chord shapes in open position (C, A, G, E, and D) and applies them up the neck for soloing and transposition in other keys. A common method among folk and popular guitarists, it was initially published in Bill Edwards, *Fretboard Logic: The Reasoning Behind the Guitar’s Unique Tuning* (Temple Terrace, Fla.: Bill Edwards Publishing, 1983).

One quality in line with the broad body of prewar guitar playing that spilled from Davis’s left hand verticality was the opportunity to employ the pan-African American aesthetic of parallel harmony, especially through the use of sixths and thirds, which Davis favored along with many other players. Played in the key of C, for example, parallel sixths sit comfortably on the guitar from first position.
Example 3.12. Parallel sixths in the key of C on the guitar.

Such parallelism was frequently used as well to exploit on the guitar the ambiguities of the neutral third, one of several notes in a so-called blues scale along with the seventh and sometimes fifth and/or sixth scale degrees that fall outside the pitch parameters of the Western diatonic scale. This bluesy accent found particular expression in the keys of C – where it can be played as a fretted E-flat on the second string against a top open-string E natural – and G, where the third string B-flat is struck against an open-string B, either one after the other or, more often than not, as a tone cluster, accentuating the ambiguous quality of such a third. Favored by blues pianists as well, this device was used in one fashion or another by just about every prewar blues guitarist whether it was Blind Lemon Jefferson in “Black Horse Blues,” Blind Boy Fuller in “Jivin’ Woman Blues,” or Davis in “Fast Fox Trot.” Notice how they all execute this idea to differing effect even though they operate from similar parallel harmonies and cross-string phrasing in the three C-shape numbers.

Example 3.14. Blind Boy Fuller, “Jivin’ Woman Blues.” CD track time 0:33-0:44. From Blind Boy Fuller: 1935-1938 Remastered (JSP Records JSP7735, 2004); original recording 1938. Pitch is closer to D and Fuller is in all likelihood using a capo on the second fret.
Davis’s left-hand capabilities – including the often difficult stretches it took to execute certain chords of his – have been explained away by some as the result of a supposed broken wrist that was reset improperly at some point in his life, thereby granting “inhuman” feats of musicality.

Yet the only account Davis ever offered was of a broken right hand wrist he suffered in 1948 after falling in the snow while in Durham for a revival. As he explained to Stefan Grossman:

There was a time also when I broke my right hand wrist. That was in North Carolina. I was carrying on a revival and I slipped down. I was going along one night and there was snow on the ground. When I stepped up on a bank of snow and my foot slipped and to keep from falling I was shuffling around. I struck my hand on an iron-water dog. I didn’t know it was broken until I went to the doctor the next morning. He told me it was broke. He put me up on a table and put me asleep. When I woke up he had a cast slammed up to my elbow.
I lost the use of that hand a long time. I thought I was never going to be able to play no more – but I did.⁴⁶

Indeed, a record of that incident exists in the $2 invoice Duke Hospital sent to the Durham Welfare Department for an x-ray taken 9 February 1948 of Davis (though there is no indication of what body part was examined).⁴⁷ Yet from the above account, Grossman somehow concluded that Davis’s left hand wrist was broken and reset out of position “a little to the left of its axis” which “enabled him to play many unusual chord positions.”⁴⁸ While a deformed wrist might explain to a degree Davis’s remarkable facility, I suspect it to be more myth than truth. When student Allan Evans asked Davis about the impact his broken wrist had on how he played, he replied, “No, I was playing the same way before it happened.”⁴⁹ Toronto musician Al Mattes, who studied with and recorded Davis in the 1960s, discounted the story, suggesting it was a student of Davis’s who actually broke his wrist, observing instead that because Davis’s fingers and, particularly, thumb were long, he was able to grab the kinds of chords for which he was famous.⁵⁰ Looking at how Davis held his guitar, however, provides the most convincing answer. He typically held his guitar with the neck at a 35-45 degree angle, the headstock essentially level with his ear. Classical guitarists do this all the time for a reason: it allows

⁴⁶Stefan Grossman, Rev. Gary Davis/Blues Guitar, 16. While Davis states he lost the use of his right hand a long time, he was back playing the guitar (in fine form, no less) eleven months later in a January 1949 recording session for Lenox.


⁴⁸Ibid., 17 n6. Bruce Bastin also addressed this apparent contradiction in Red River Blues, 250, 252-53 n40, concluding that Grossman likely confused what Davis said, though the possibility that a broken right hand wrist contributed to his virtuosity was “intriguing to contemplate.”


⁵⁰Basiuk, “Interview with Al Mattes,” 16.
a wider left hand reach on the fretboard than if the guitar were placed in the usual seated or standing position of most folk performers with the body perpendicular to the instrument. Indeed, many of the “unorthodox” chords in Davis’s musical vocabulary are lingua franca for classical guitarists who make such figures with ease because they, like Davis, hold the guitar in such a manner. This isn’t to suggest Davis played like a classical guitarist – many of his techniques such as the left-hand thumb coming over to fret strings are anathema inside the confines of a conservatory – but merely to state that Davis arrived at solutions which paralleled at times what conventionally-trained guitarists are taught.

How Davis strapped a guitar around his neck also helped facilitate an angular fretboard position. While most guitarists who use a strap place it around the back of the neck so that it rests over the left shoulder and along the back behind the right shoulder, Davis let the strap sit over his neck on both shoulders with the right arm coming over the strap. This, of course, made it easy to cock the guitar into an angled position, but it also solved another, much more practical problem for the street musician: it made it harder for someone to steal his guitar out from under him while he was playing.51

In concluding this preliminary look at Davis’s technique, we might mention that while he developed his style from various sources, he also brought much personal innovation to the process, aided in no small part by the fact that he was a blind musician, which not only pushed him to develop a heightened aural sensitivity but demanded from him an approach developed without any visual role models to learn from and imitate.

And like other blind performers who had to negotiate their own solutions around an instrument, innovation and virtuosity often followed.\textsuperscript{52}

\textbf{TUNING}

One aspect of Davis’s playing that could annoy even his most ardent admirers was how he tuned his guitar. He preferred to tune his bass E string slightly lower and his top E string slightly higher, each by several cents, against the otherwise normal pitch relations of his standard-tuned instrument. To the uninitiated, the result could sound painfully out-of-tune, though if someone tried to tune Davis’s guitar “properly,” he would invariably return it to its initial cranky setting. As Eric von Schmidt recounted of one ill-fated attempt to get Davis’s guitar in tune, “Miss Gibson, who just moments before had sparkled like a fine salt spray, now once again groaned like a tired old chariot for to carry us home.”\textsuperscript{53}

Davis was not alone in forcing non-standard intonation on a standard-tuned guitar, the delightful dropped-D rumble of Joseph Spence’s guitar being another example. And it wasn’t the result of poor hearing – as onetime student John Townley observed, “He was awfully good at over-hearing if he was deaf.”\textsuperscript{54} Rather, this seemingly eccentric quality of Davis addressed a number of concerns including an added richness in overtones, better

\textsuperscript{52} See Cohen, “The Hands of Blues Guitarists,” 172, and David Evans, Big Road Blues: Tradition & Creativity in the Folk Blues (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1987), 168. In studies of blind eight year olds, even the act of throwing a ball veered from the norm when there was no visual model to imitate; see Bryant J. Cratty, Movement and Spatial Awareness in Blind Children and Youth (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1971), 114.


\textsuperscript{54} John Townley, telephone interview by author, 8 February 2009, digital recording.
delineation of musical parts, and, yes, intonation. As any piano tuner will state, Davis was stretching the octave. Unlike a column of air, the inharmonicity of wire strings creates a pitch-correlated stiffness that necessitates adjustment.\(^{55}\) For Davis, pushing the outer edges of the open E double octave arguably made the guitar more in tune than strict adherence to standard, equal-tempered tuning. Put another way, the guitar was in tune with how Davis played it if not with how another guitarist might play that same instrument. Apostolic studio owner Townley, who recorded Davis for the \textit{O, Glory} sessions, suggests that Davis’s tuning method works best on his preferred instrument, a Gibson J-200; specifically, octave stretching on such a guitar gives sparkle to its dull midrange in addition to making the bass deeper and the treble keener—“You notice a bass is a bass more and high strings more singing and strident.”\(^{56}\) Given Davis’s concern with layers of sound, contrapuntal and otherwise, in his playing, the more he could achieve separation of ideas, the better he could approximate the pianist ideal in his head, and pushing the propriety of his tuning was one effective method.

**KEYS**

Key choice gives us some further insight into Davis the technician. I have used the term “key” somewhat conveniently to imply more a chord shape on the guitar than actual pitch, since Davis’s guitar was often tuned slightly below or above standard pitch. A song in the key of C, for example, might actually be closer to B-flat, especially in the case where he played the twelve-string guitar, which was invariably tuned low, but the


\(^{56}\)Townley, interview by author, 8 February 2009, and further correspondence 3 July 2009.
more significant element would be his choice of a C chord shape for the rhetorical musical devices of that song. Therefore, while the term “chord shape” or the identification of various fretting positions (open, first, second, et al.) are more accurate, they can also be more limiting in their descriptive usefulness to just guitar players, hence the more readily grasped term key for much of the below discussion. Bolstering this defense, Davis himself thought in such terms and used “key” to refer to various chord shapes he played.

It should be noted that Davis played everything on the guitar in standard tuning (E-A-D-G-B-E from low to high string) except for one song set in a scordatura (the strings tuned to a sixth chord, D-A-D-F##-A-B, from low to high). In addition, he played consistently without a capotasto and was recorded using one but once in 1935 on “I Am the True Vine.” This is in stark contrast to Blind Boy Fuller, who used a capo on at least 50% of his recorded performances (see Table 1 below). One exception was the capo that Davis had for his guitar-banjo, possibly due to its long neck, which can clearly be seen in one photograph of him with his “guitjo.”\(^{57}\) In fact, the sole recorded song in which he used a capo on his guitar-banjo was a spontaneous vamp of Blind Boy Fuller’s “She’s Funny That Way,” which Davis played in Fuller’s original key shape (C) and approximate pitch (E instead of E-flat for Fuller, necessitating a capo at the fourth fret). When playing a guitar, however, the overall lack of alternate tunings and capo was purposeful and deliberate on the part of Davis. By eliminating additional tunings and capo movement, tactile and spatial relationships on a fretboard would have become better imprinted in his playing, thus giving Davis instant familiarity, as a blind man, on the

\(^{57}\)Photograph can be viewed at Alex Shoumatoff’s web page at http://blog.dispatchesfromthevanishingworld.com/?s=Gary+Davis (last accessed 16 August 2010).
necks of most acoustic guitars. This was even more significant given that Davis frequently moved around on the guitar neck into upper positions unlike Fuller, whose playing was, by and large, in open position except for the occasional break or fill no matter where the capo landed.

Key choice also creates its own rhetorical language on the guitar, i.e., style “strongly conditioned by the parameter of action” in the words of John Baily and Peter Driver.58 In their paper, built on ideas presented by David Evans at a London conference, the authors suggest how the physical considerations in playing an instrument dictate much of what the musical language will be on said instrument, i.e., that the patterns of body movement translate into patterns of sound and not vice versa. It is a fascinating proposal and one worth further study when we consider that the spatio-motor thinking on an instrument such as the guitar has as much if not more to do with the types of ideas generated in a performance than even the mental and contextual processes at play. For example, Davis played many different songs in C, but all used certain stock devices that come from only playing in C. One of these patterns for Davis was to slide from open position to fifth position, where he could make another C chord in a half-barre A shape that allowed several things at once: it became easy not only to grab a tonic C note at the eighth fret, but to quickly descend an octave by using the built-in pentatonic notes of the fifth position shape against the open E string. This E string, of course, is the third of the scale in C and as such, also acts as a melodic pivot between open and fifth position. In addition, by moving to fifth position as he frequently did in C, Davis now had the added rhetorical devices afforded by a new shape, namely the trademark chromatic bass walk-

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down found mostly in open position G and A, as in the aforementioned tremolo lick in “Sally.”

Given the above, there is as strong a rationale in categorizing Davis’s musical settings by key as there is in quantifying his lyrics or imagery by sacred/secular type. In sacred and secular song alike, the musical language in Davis’s playing flows from the choice of key, and no more clear case can be made than his 1935 recordings of “I’m Throwing Up My Hands” and “Twelve Gates to the City.” Both were in A with a musical bed that is often quite interchangeable despite the structural and lyrical differences (and predictably, these same devices show up in other Davis songs in A, such as “When the Train Comes Along” and “Time Is Drawing Near”). In addition, certain C numbers from the same debut sessions – notably “You Can Go Home,” “I Belong to the Band – Hallelujah!” and “Lord, Stand By Me” – operate in similar fashion to the extent that even their melodic contours mirrored one another.


That we find a sharing of rhetorical devices musically and/or vocally within any given key should not be surprising – all guitarists, after all, favor certain keys vocally but also for the types of guitar “licks” those keys may offer. Yet rather than think of such recurring riffs and ideas as a form of musical recycling or, worse, self-plagiarism, perhaps it is better to consider that Davis was recombining what was available, telling a new story each time from the collective rhetorical devices at his disposal. Regional and cultural preferences informed his playing, but so too did key choice and the intervallic and phrasal relationships prescribed from one key to the next.
In a survey of keys in Davis’s guitar repertoire (see Appendix 5), the song breakdown is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key</th>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Sacred</th>
<th>Secular</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>71 (46 sacred, 25 secular)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>60 (25 sacred, 35 secular)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>17 (8 sacred, 9 secular)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>13 (6 sacred, 7 secular)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>13 (9 sacred, 4 secular)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>9 (2 sacred, 7 secular)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E minor</td>
<td>9 (7 sacred, 2 secular)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A minor</td>
<td>7 (2 sacred, 5 secular)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-flat</td>
<td>1 (sacred)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open D6</td>
<td>1 (secular)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Like many of his blues and gospel peers, the overriding majority of Davis’s material was played in G and C – sixty-seven of Blind Blake’s seventy-eight tunes, for example, were played in either G or C; ditto Blind Boy Fuller, who used G and C in about half of his repertoire (E and A were his other predominant key choices). The abundance of G and C makes sense for a number of reasons including, foremost, the compatibility such keys have with the male voice, where a G sung in the upper register acts to emphasize either the tonic or dominant in a performance, ensuring maximum emotional expression, movement, and power in a song be it blues or gospel. G and C on the guitar also allow easy manipulation of the neutral third in the blues scale through a combination of fretted and open high strings – open B for the key of G and open E for the key of C. For Piedmont blues guitarists in particular, G and C were also the most compatible keys for playing blues rag progressions, since all related chords – E, A, and D in G and A, D, and G in C – could be played in open position in those keys. In addition, the open strings of a guitar in standard tuning – E-A-D-G-B-E – contain what are essentially the notes of a pentatonic scale (G-A-B-D-E) in the key of G, suggesting
another reason why that key became favored in much prewar African American vernacular guitar playing and particularly by Davis, who deferred to that key more than any, especially when it came to his sacred repertoire and its characteristic pentatonic melodies.

But Davis’s range of keys is also worth noting. He used ten different keys and/or tunings that have been documented. Blind Blake, by comparison, used eight while Fuller used six.59 Only Blind Willie McTell showed as much variety, having used ten keys and/or tunings over the course of some ninety-five tunes.60 Yet even with McTell, the majority of his songs (55%) were played in either C or open D (the latter tuning used largely for his religious material).

Where Davis made his own rightful claim on key choice was in his third most prominent key, F. Though McTell and Blake both played a sampling of tunes in F – “My Blue Heaven” and “Beedle Um Bum” by the former; “Search Warrant Blues,” “Notoriety Woman Blues,” “Doing A Stretch,” “Fightin’ the Jug,” and a quick modulation to F in “Blind Arthur’s Breakdown” by the latter – Davis gave the key of F a more realized repertoire and language, perhaps heard no better than in the tour de force “Soldier’s Drill” (see the secular music chapter for more on that song). Given the almost even split between secular and sacred numbers in F, Davis was comfortable with the key no matter the setting or situation, and some of his defining tunes sit in F (much to the consternation

59Davis stated that he could play in other keys such as B minor, and he playfully hinted at an eleventh tuning – dropped D – in his 1953 recording of “You Got to Move,” during which he tuned his E bass string down to D to finish out the performance. See Reverend Gary Davis, If I Had My Way: Early Home Recordings (Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings SFW CD 40123, 2003).

60Although the chord shape/key choice of certain songs by McTell is difficult to pinpoint due to tuning issues and who is playing what on some of the duets, my summation – discounting second takes and songs on which he was accompanist – is as follows: C (36); open D (17); E (16); G (12); drop D (6); open G (2); D (2); F (2); D minor (1); and A minor (1).
of the beginning blues guitarist). These include “Devil’s Dream,” a folk rag with two strains – an A theme in F and a B theme in D minor – that seems to have been a dance piece of Davis’s own invention, sharing as it did no content with either the more common fiddler’s piece of the same name (though like many fiddle tunes it is bipartite in structure) nor the distantly-related African American variant Sid Hemphill recorded on the quills for Alan Lomax in 1942 and 1959.

David was also known to play an F accompaniment to “Candy Man” while his students practiced it in the usual open-position C shape, albeit capoed five frets; see Evans, liner notes to Sun of Our Life, 7. One such version from 1971 with student/chauffeur Larry Breezer on second guitar can be heard on the Davis/Lead Belly/Dan Smith compilation Good Morning Blues (Biograph BCD 113, 1990).

The chordal choking necessary to make an F shape, however, was merely an extension of the same left hand shape Davis frequently applied in the key of G, itself a unique application among prewar blues or gospel guitarists of that key outside of open position. Yet by shifting the shape down two steps, different cross-relationships became available between the fretted and open strings, and, as a result, Davis’s choice of F for a number of sacred tunes became especially effective. Songs such as “Blow, Gabriel,”
“God’s Gonna Separate the Wheat From The Tares,” and “The Angel’s Message to Me” derived much of their modal weight from his ability to manipulate various scale degrees in F through the use of adjacent fretted and open strings. In “God’s Gonna Separate,” for example, Davis creates a spirited tension through cross-voicings, especially between A-natural in the bass and A-flat in the treble (its own negotiation of the inherent ambiguities of the “blues” scale neutral third) as well as the melodic possibilities laid out vertically through a series of first-fret pull-offs onto open strings (C to B-natural and A-flat to G, plus F to E elsewhere in the song):


Other key choices are also revealing. Of Davis’s nine songs in E, all seven secular tunes are blues structures (and one could make the case for the two sacred numbers, “Bad Company Brought Me Here” and “Sun Is Going Down,” as having strong blues qualities – see pp. 224-40 for thoughts on the latter). Indeed, E is perhaps the most blues-imbued key of all on guitar since the open strings – when rearranged as E-G-A-B-D-E – become a tonic, flat third, fourth, fifth and flat seventh in the key of E, which, in essence gives a guitarist much of the needed blues content via the tuning itself. Davis seemed sensitive to this quality, having reserved E almost entirely for blues performances. On the other hand, almost all of Davis’s repertoire in E minor was religious, including some of his most
dramatic and profound expressions such as “Death Don’t Have No Mercy,” “(I Heard the) Angels Singing,” and “Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning.” Using the same open strings, Davis the gospel performer was able to enhance in this case the moaning, minor quality of the spirituals through the same basic tuning. Allan Evans, in fact, makes the argument that Davis was one of the few prewar folk-blues/gospel guitarists to use minor keys with any regularity, and, indeed, Davis used A minor and E minor a total of fifteen times compared with no overt minor chording by his evangelist prewar peers, only one minor tune from Blind Blake (“Rope Stretchin' Blues” Parts 1 and 2, which begins in A minor but modulates to the relative major of C, not unlike how Davis handled “Hesitation Blues”), and two by Blind Willie McTell (“Dying Crapshooter’s Blues” in D minor and “St. James Infirmary” in A minor). No other artist besides Davis, however, used E minor, let alone with his frequency.

Two other keys are perhaps even more unusual. The first is E-flat, no easy key for the typical folk-blues guitarist, who is required to make a full or partial barre either in third or sixth position. Davis, however, prided himself in being able to perform in such a manner, noting to Ernie Hawkins that “You don’t hardly find many guitar players, you know, play in those keys” before launching into the gospel number, “It’s a Highway to Heaven (Walking Up the King’s Highway).” Written by Thomas Dorsey and Mary

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63 Evans, liner notes, Sun of Our Life, 4.

64 The use of a minor iv chord in a major key appears on several recordings by prewar blues guitarists, notably Blind Lemon Jefferson, “Wartime Blues” (Paramount 12425, 1926), Geeshie Wiley, “Last Kind Words Blues” (Paramount 12951, 1930), and Blind Boy Fuller, “Weeping Willow” (Decca 7331, 1937) “Ain’t No Getting” Along” (Vocalion 04391, 1937). This is not the same thing, however, as setting the tonality of a song in a minor key.

65 Private tape, Ernie Hawkins, Tape 5a track 8, 0:16-0:20. Sam and Bo Chatmon also played in E-flat.
Gardner and published in 1954, the song had been recorded by Mahalia Jackson among many others black and white, and showed that Davis was adding material to his repertoire well into the 1950s. In adopting newer music, Davis also revealed a progressive attitude toward his playing. Here, he is no turn-of-the-century tunesmith but an urbane musician fretting with all the sophistication of a jazz or pop guitarist on what was a then-modern gospel number, even adhering to Dorsey’s original published key for the song. Mahalia Jackson’s arrangement, by comparison, was in G, a key best suited to Davis’s gospel guitar music, which made his choice of E-flat even more notable. Perhaps no number, in fact, better demonstrated Davis’s contention that “I play the city style,” as opposed to the cadre of country blues players or old-time pickers like Mississippi John Hurt and Elizabeth Cotton he must have felt he was unfairly grouped with. Though Davis played the song in strummed chordal patterns, he did so from barred fingerings throughout and used only the occasional open string. His ease in blocking out fretted patterns and formations even results in two equally non-traditional shapes for the tonic chord, one barred from third position (as in the opening measures below) and the other from first (as in the closing measures).

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Indeed, one aspect of using barre, or block, chording, as Davis does here, is that relationships become largely vertical on the guitar neck (as discussed previously in this
chapter) and therefore easily transposable. As such, Davis’s playing in E-flat, while not as flashy as what he could do a half-step down in D, was nonetheless built on the same kinds of barre positions and relationships that he displayed on a much grander scale in such D tunes as “You Gotta Move.” Broadly speaking, the application of choked or barre chords – a defining trait in much of Davis’s playing in such keys as G, F, and D – likely came from his musical interaction in gospel circles. He was known to accompany pianists in flat keys in church settings, after all, and such guitar logic would have allowed quick and easy adaptation to pitch as presented by the variance in hymn and congregational singing.  

We get a snapshot of this method in a church service where a congregant began singing an a cappella version of “Steal Away” in G on which Davis then quickly joined, struggling for a brief second as he mapped out his accompaniment up the neck – for had the singer landed on G-sharp or F-sharp instead of G, Davis’s blocked chord approach would have easily compensated, unencumbered as it was by the key shapes of open position. This method also would have allowed Davis equal readiness adapting to the pitch preferences of any gospel singers, quartets, et al., he may have accompanied (that said, of the six known tunes recorded post-1935 on which Davis backed other singers – namely McKinley Peebles and Susie Dews – five are set in G and one in C).

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68 Reverend Gary Davis, “Steal Away,” on At Home and Church (Stefan Grossman’ Guitar Workshop SGGW 130/1/2, 2010).
“WHISTLIN’ BLUES”: A CASE STUDY ON THE IMPLICATIONS OF KEY

Like Blind Lemon Jefferson, Reverend Gary Davis had only one slide tune in his repertoire (that was ever recorded, at least). The song, “Whistlin’ Blues,” was also his only guitar number to forego standard tuning and as a result is singular within Davis’s canon. It is also unique among the entire body of prewar guitar blues – a spoken twelve-bar blues tuned in an open-D scordatura with the highest string tuned a minor third below the expected pitch of D down to B. This tuning (D-A-D-F#-A-B, bass to treble strings) operates as something of a Dmaj6 chord, though its primary function was to lay out the song’s tonal content and melodic relationships on the open strings.

The main musical idea – the “Whistlin’ Blues” of the title – is a twelve-bar blues with a thick tremolo across all six strings by a slide device moving up and down in parallel fashion. Davis typically used a pocketknife and called such playing “knife-guitar.”

[Example 3.22. Reverend Gary Davis, riff under spoken part of “Whistlin’ Blues.” CD track time 0:04-0:11. From Heroes of the Blues: The Very Best of Rev. Gary Davis (Shout! Factory DK 30257, 2003); original recording 1971.]

The simplicity, however, was countered with finessed 3-against-4 phrasing.

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69 Evans, liner notes, Sun of Our Life, 12. Howard Odum reported “knife-song” as the de facto term for what would come to be called slide guitar performance; see Howard W. Odum, “Folk-Song and
between the bass and treble strings that achieves to a delightful degree piano-imitating interdependence of rhythm.


No other such tuning shows up among prewar bluesmen, and it may have been an adaptation by Davis of slack-key Hawaiian guitar possibly encountered via vaudeville.\textsuperscript{70} It was also one of the few songs he played on the twelve-string guitar which took advantage of the timbral and resonant qualities of that instrument, where the vibration of double courses combined with Davis’s rickety slide vibrato and a suggestive boogie woogie rhythm in the bass strings to effectually imitate the sound of the song’s cynosure object, a barrelhouse piano.

That Davis abhorred such tunings or the use of a slide makes this song even more peculiar. As he once remarked about playing guitar in a bottleneck manner, “I don’t think nothing of that! You’re cheating your own self. It ain’t so respectable. People think it’s a pretty thing but it’s not.”\textsuperscript{71} Yet Davis kept this one song in his working repertoire and played it on a number of occasions live and in the studio. One explanation is simply Davis’s well-noted competitive spirit. As Stefan Grossman recalled, Davis, upon hearing a tape of Bukka White on slide guitar, grabbed a glass cigar holder to demonstrate his own slide prowess in the form of “Whistlin’ Blues”\textsuperscript{72} (indeed, the manner in which Davis’s slide lay across the entire neck at the 5th, 7th, and 12th frets was similar to how White played a song such as “Po’ Boy” – later recast as ”Jesus Died on the Cross to Save the World” – though White used an open G tuning for his guitar accompaniment, which further varied in melodic content and its right-hand picking pattern).

\textsuperscript{70}The song’s source is not known and may be of Davis’s own imagination. It bears no resemblance, for example, to the popular turn-of-the-century number “Whistling Rufus,” nor to Bessie Tucker’s “Whistling Woman Blues,” “Whistling Blues” by Meade Lux Lewis or Whistling Bob Howe, and Whistlin’ Kid Docket’s “Whistlin’ the Blues.”


\textsuperscript{72}Ibid., 6.
But “Whistlin Blues” also operated on levels beyond one-upmanship including, I propose, the reconciliatory dynamics of classic myth spinning. Functioning under the same processes as collective myth yet addressing the individual psyche, “Whistlin’ Blues” behaves as personal myth and contains, as the following analysis shows, qualities of paradox, symbolism, and transcendence, showing in the process how key choice can directly tie into meaning and the symbolic implications of a song.

The first mention of the song appeared in a review of a late 1950s concert Davis gave in Boston. Three commercially released versions of “Whistlin’ Blues” are available, two recorded live and one from in the studio. Davis essentially told the same story in all three with slight self-editing on the studio version. The performance richest in detail is the one Grossman recorded in concert in the mid-1960s, transcribed as follows:

I was comin’ along as a young man, you know. Hadn’t never been nowhere, you know, and I decided I’d make up my mind. I would go somewhere. Enjoy my life! Give me your attention, now, folkses.

I didn’t want to go no short distance. I wanted to go a good ways, long ways, so I could have some truth to tell. I decided I’d go to Los Angeles, California. Just kind of bum around there a little while, you know. Find out just how I like it. I done around got money enough to get to California. Show you what a green-head man and what happened to him.

Spent all my money, you understand, buying this ticket. After buying this ticket, you know, and getting to this place, when I hit the ground, you know, I thought about getting me a pack of cigarettes, you know, I didn’t have one dime in my pocket. You know that was something bad.

I still wouldn’t let it worry me. All dressed to death and broke to death, too. Didn’t have nothing. I never thought about myself ’til I looked up at the sun. The sun was going down. Nobody could ever meet you up there, and they didn’t show any kind of smile on their faces. So I went on, you know, I kept on stompin’ and dancin’ around there tryin’ to line myself up, now. I didn’t have nothin’ to line myself up with. I walking kinda scared, you know. I happened to look back. I

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don’t know what caused me to look back. I looked back and saw a tall girl come along, and she was made up, you know. You know, when they made up good, I call ’em “pony-builts,” you understand. She had hair like Mary and I believe she walked just like the Lord. I kept on looking at her – you know, a man will look at a good-lookin’ woman. I kept on walking pretty scared. I said, well, I don’t reckon I’ll get a chance to talk to her no how. She was lookin’ at me, and I was lookin’ at her. I got to walkin’ pretty scared, you know. She whistled at me.

[Plays slide, imitates whistling]

I stopped, you know, boy. I seen she wasn’t going to catch up with me. I broke out again, started to running. ‘Cause the sun was going down. I wanted to get where I could hear something going on if I didn’t know nobody. She throwed it at me again.

[Plays slide, imitates whistling]

I stopped then, you know, and I stayed there. She walked up to me, first thing she done, she throwed her arm around me and gave me a sap in the mouth. God almighty, you know, I felt like then I owned a million dollars, I declare. She said, “Come on let’s go around here to the liquor store. Let’s us get us something to drink.” She carried me around there, you know. She bought a jar, then she bought a, a quart of this here, the best kind of whiskey they call, uh, rock and rye. She put a quart of it in her, in her, in her pocketbook and a pint in her bosom. Says, “Come on, let’s go down here where the dance is tonight. I got to play down here.” So I got my head bad, you know, my nose twisted. I didn’t care. Didn’t know whether I was going to get killed or no. Well, I wasn’t thinking of it, didn’t have that on my mind. You know, that girl set down there, commenced to playin’ that thing they call “The Whistlin’ Blues.” Barry, how you reckon she done that thing? (How?)

She had one arm around me, boy, she picking that piano something like this. Listen!

[Plays one twelve-bar of “Whistlin’ Blues”]

I said to me, what kind of thing is this I done got into? Every once in a while she put the bottle to her mouth and then sap me in the mouth, give me a kiss and then throw the bottle in my mouth. I got so twisted I didn’t care. I said, “Whoop the thing for me, miss!” She commence to playing.

[Plays one twelve-bar of “Whistlin’ Blues”]

God almighty, play that thing!

[Plays one twelve-bar of “Whistlin’ Blues” with descending bass]
Then she commence to singing that thing.

[Plays one twelve-bar of “Whistlin’ Blues”]

Huh? You hear that whistling?

[Plays one twelve-bar of “Whistlin’ Blues”]

Oh, good god almighty, you hear that? Ah.

[Plays one twelve-bar of “Whistlin’ Blues” octave higher]

God knows.

[Plays one twelve-bar of “Whistlin’ Blues” with descending bass]74

The outline of the above – which Davis adhered to in other performances – can be distilled down to the following:

A young, inexperienced Davis decides to travel and enjoy his life.

He must travel a long distance in order to “have some truth to tell.”

He travels to a city, Los Angeles.

He spends all his money getting there.

He isn’t worried until the sun starts to set.

People in the city aren’t friendly.

He has no luck lining up a place to stay and begins to get scared.

He looks behind him and sees a tall, beautiful woman.

She has hair like Mary and walks just like the Lord.

He decides he has no chance with her and keeps on walking, scared.

She whistles to him (the siren’s call).

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He stops, but she is far behind. (In other versions, she is preoccupied talking to other men, and is possibly a prostitute.)

He starts running, still afraid and worried about where he will stay.

She whistles to him again.

He stops and stays this time.

She kisses him, and he feels rich.

She takes him to a liquor store.

She buys whiskey, and they split it.

She takes him to a dance hall where she is playing.

Drunk, he no longer cares about his welfare despite the threat of danger.

She plays “The Whistlin’ Blues” on piano with Davis by her side.

She continues to kiss him and play. She finally sings.

Davis asks the audience if they can hear the music (a sharing of his epiphany).

As previously suggested, the above story is ripe with interpretive possibilities – including archetype and myth – depending on how it is read.

Seen through an ethnographic lens as a talking blues, the lyrics reinforce the itinerant lifestyle and experiences of a bluesman getting his feet wet for the first time, gaining the kind of world “truth” that becomes the backbone of any credible blues performance. The parallels to Bukka White’s slide version of “Po’ Boy” certainly increase when the song’s full phrase is taken into account, “Poor boy, long ways from home,” which is the same condition in which Davis finds himself in “Whistlin’ Blues.” However, in Davis’s case, we might say that the woman is the blues, a personification of the one constant life companion he had, music. In addition, the song bears thematic
resemblance to such early-in-their-career, coming-of-age blues sagas as John Lee Hooker’s “Boogie Chillen” and Bo Diddley’s “I’m a Man,” and may very well indicate “Whistlin’ Blues” as an early number from Davis’s repertoire. If that were the case, it becomes tempting to think that Davis, like many blind musicians of his generation, performed early on in open tunings and slide but distanced himself from that style as he got better skilled on the guitar, retaining this one “showcase” number.

When we adopt a Jungian approach, the story takes on another tone entirely, one in which Davis can be said to embrace his anima, that intermediary of the unconscious manifest as the tale’s female figure who surprisingly appears as the third of Jung’s four anima phases, i.e., the embodiment of Mary (the traditionally-constructed line, “She had hair like Mary and I believe she walked just like the Lord”). That Davis meets her in the “City of Angels” – a place he never traveled to as a young man – enriches the scenario further.

Indeed, in writing of the anima as a manifestation of the male unconscious, Carl Jung could almost be describing the mysterious woman who takes Davis on his journey of discovery and self-awareness:

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75 David Evans, correspondence with author 30 July 2010, Memphis, Tennessee. For the best interpretative analysis ever provided on Bo Diddley’s “I’m a Man,” see David Evans, “Afro-American One-Stringed Instruments,” Western Folklore 29, no. 4 (October 1970), 229-45.

It belongs to him, this perilous image of Woman; she stands for the loyalty which in the interests of life he must sometimes forgo; she is the much-needed compensation for the risks, struggles, sacrifices that all end in disappointment; she is the solace for all the bitterness of life. And, at the same time, she is the great illusionist, the seductress, who draws him into life with her Maya – and not only into life’s reasonable and useful aspects, but into its frightful paradoxes and ambivalences where good and evil, success and ruin, hope and despair, counterbalance one another. Because she is his greatest danger she demands from a man his greatest, and if he has it in him she will receive it.\(^77\)

Further dissection takes the song into the realm of personal myth where, intriguingly, it adheres to the larger dramatic arc of mythmaking as laid out by Joseph Campbell in his classic *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, namely a) separation/departure; b) initiation; and c) return (this last part more of an implied conclusion – Davis lived to tell the tale and was now in a position to share what he had learned with his audiences).\(^78\)

In regard to the first element of departure, “Whistlin’ Blues” lines up remarkably with aspects of pan-mythmaking identified by Campbell as follows: a) the call to adventure; b) a temporary refusal of the call; c) supernatural aid in the form of the whistling woman, i.e., the “benign protecting power of destiny” who is frequently represented by the Virgin Mary in Christian lore (curiously, this Cosmic Mother controls the sun in another myth – indeed, in Davis’s song, the two are also inseparable since the setting sun precipitates his encounter with the woman);\(^79\) d) the crossing of the first threshold, at what Campbell calls a “zone of magnified power” which might be represented here by the liquor store – only after stopping at the store (the search for spirits, no less) and getting drunk on its offerings does Davis lose his fear of the potential dangers that lie ahead, a necessary


\(^{79}\)Ibid., 71.
development for the hero at this juncture; and e) the belly of the whale scenario, where the hero gets “swallowed” by the unknown, which might be seen as Davis’s descent into secular/blues culture that at once frightens and fascinates him.

Furthermore, within the second level of initiation, we find other parallels, namely: a) the road of trials, where the club, a typically dark environment sometimes set up in a basement, becomes a substitute for the dark cave of traditional myth; b) a meeting with the goddess, and here I would argue that the female aide, who goes from whistler to performer, also goes from guide to goddess (she further behaves as temptress in Campbell’s construct); c) the apotheosis, where in a transformational shift a young, green Davis becomes the experienced bluesman; and d) what Campbell calls the ultimate boon, a passing of power – the “elixir of imperishable being” – from god to hero, which is represented in almost inverse imagery to the soul-forfeiting crossroads myth of blues lore by a final kiss bestowed on Davis while he sits at the piano with his female guide.81

As for the return, Davis concludes his song lost in the night’s revelry and music, figuratively within the song but also literally before the audience with whom he is sharing the song. This can either be interpreted as a refusal of the return, or I would argue, the emergence of a master of two worlds, where Davis the preacher/bluesman achieved a balance in the seeming contradictions of his own life. In that light, the return became manifest for Davis every time he took to a stage. As Campbell observed of such a master – and his description is a remarkably apt summation of blues logic as well – “It is

80Blues scholar David Evans has suggested that, to the extent that blues performance is a ritualized activity, the blues singer, i.e. “Self,” and the romantic “Other” in a typical blues song essentially fill the roles of gods and goddesses found in classic myth; see David Evans, “Traditional Blues Lyrics and Myth: Some Correspondences,” in The Lyrics in African American Popular Music, ed. Robert Springer (Bern: Peter Lang, 2001), 29.

81Campbell, Hero, 181.
possible to speak from only one point at a time, but that does not invalidate the insights of the rest.”

Davis’s story-song even concludes with myth-like fortitude, unlocking, in the words of Campbell, “the flow of life into the body of the world” not through symbols of the harvest or grace but through a type of released energy in the form of music. This energy overtakes the final third of the song, where extended musical repetitions of the actual tune, “Whistlin’ Blues,” act with trance-like iteration as a mantra or prayer – Davis the shaman has emerged, the returning hero sharing his epiphany with the group, and in that light, the final words in his above performance – “Huh? You hear that whistling? Oh, good god almighty, you hear that? Ah. God knows.” – become especially telling.

We might conclude this analytic detour by looking at how structuralism amplifies the myth-like aspects of “Whistlin’ Blues.” Insofar as myth employs contrastive language and imagery as a way to form abstract notions and propositions about life, “Whistlin’ Blues,” like other blue structures (as demonstrated in Chapter Six), is riddled with the juxtaposition and reconciliation of opposites, namely:

- Rural → urban
- Day/sun → night/no sun
- Inexperience → experience
- Financially poor → spiritually rich

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82 Ibid., 229.
83 Ibid., 40.
84 Mark D. Winborn, conversation with author, Memphis, Tennessee, 18 December 2009. I am grateful to Dr. Winborn, a Jungian psychologist, for his thoughts on myth, archetype, and shamanistic practice.
Fear/worry → trust
Walking/rootless → sitting/grounded
Sober → drunk
Reliance on sight → reliance on hearing
Solitary/companionless → Related/companion
Homeless → home

And here we might return to Jung and his concept of “transcendent function,” the explication of opposites through which transcendence of one state or another only occurs when the two are held together in a unifying tension. Wrote Jung of the concept (fine-tuned from German idealism and the reconciliatory concept of synthesis coming out of thesis/antithesis): “The shuttling to and fro of arguments and affects represents the transcendent function of opposites. The confrontation of the two positions generates a tension charged with energy and creates a living, third thing – not a logical stillbirth in accordance with the principle tertium non datur but a movement out of the suspension between opposites, a living birth that leads to a new level of being, a new situation. The transcendent function manifests itself as quality of conjoined opposites.”86

In similar fashion but from an anthropological perspective, Claude Lévi-Strauss argued that myth didn’t reveal itself entirely by linear readings but through the bundling of related events, what he dubbed “gross constituent units.”87 With that in mind,

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“Whistlin’ Blues” can be reassembled into connected actions and conditional states (see the below chart). Taken in four bundles of activity separated by notions of a) travel, b) time of day, c) the Self (Davis), and d) the Other (the woman), each conscribed bundle operates as a frame of motion or movement, leading Davis from one set of conditions toward their opposed state, resolution coming in music as a final destination for each bundle. The concept of travel is notably key, serving as it can in blues to enact not just a physical move from one place to another but a move between oppositional states of being.88 In the case of “Whistlin’ Blues,” all roads lead to music, that state of being in Davis’s myth-journey where he found purpose and acceptance.

On a final note, Davis is, curiously enough, sighted in “Whistlin’ Blues,” and makes frequent reference early on to what he is witnessing. This imposed fallacy is necessary, however, in order for Davis to address a higher truth. Only by beginning the song with an ability to see can Davis’s transformation fully take effect, where one sense (sight) gives way to another (hearing) – the sun sets and Davis must navigate a terrain of darkness, which was his reality, his normality, as a blind man. The central motif of the sun going down could even imply a loss of sight if not the loss or passing of knowledge gained by sight. More pertinent, a different kind of knowledge must take its place, one that comes from feel and sound. He hears the whistle/call, and literally follows the music into the night where sighted survival skills are no longer meaningful. Instead, a second sight has emerged: Davis navigates the world by hearing what it has to offer.

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88 Evans, “Traditional Blues Lyrics and Myth,” 27. Psychoanalyst Mark Winborn also views the blues trope of travel as a “metaphor for shifts in psychological states and geographical references as an analogy of the inner world;” see Winborn, “Archetypal Aspects of Blues Music” (paper, Inter-Regional Society of Jungian Analysts, 1999), 105.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Travel</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Davis</th>
<th>Woman (agent of action)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home (rural implied)</td>
<td>Daylight (safe/land of sight)</td>
<td>Green and cocky</td>
<td>Appears almost as vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>Sun begins to set</td>
<td>Arrives in Los Angeles</td>
<td>Whistles to Davis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street</td>
<td>Becomes worried</td>
<td>No money/no place to stay</td>
<td>Whistles again</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ignores whistle/call</td>
<td>First experience (people unfriendly)</td>
<td>Kisses Davis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stops and meets woman</td>
<td>He feels rich (acquires different kind of wealth)</td>
<td>Takes Davis to liquor store</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gets drunk</td>
<td></td>
<td>Buys whiskey and shares with Davis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHART, cont.

Dance hall \(\downarrow\) Night \(\downarrow\) No longer worried \(\downarrow\) Takes Davis to dance hall
(\text{not safe/land of} \ \text{"second sight"}) \(\downarrow\) \(\downarrow\) Plays the piano, \text{"Whistlin' Blues"}
\(\downarrow\) Second experience (people friendly)
\(\downarrow\)

Music (destination)

Welcoming place/new home \(\downarrow\) Nighttime activity \(\downarrow\) Companion \(\downarrow\) Call to action
As the above chart shows, music, as expressed in the siren’s call of the piano player, has led him to this place and he embraces all it has to offer.

“Whistlin’ Blues” is a beautiful story rendered even more poignant by how Davis treats the material musically. I don’t think it was coincidence that this was the only slide/open tuned song in his working repertoire. Only by invoking a tuning and technique that was apart from the rest of his music could a special place be reserved for this very special story. That Davis held bottleneck slide playing in contempt doesn’t contradict his having maintained one song in that style – “Whistlin’ Blues” was not performed by Davis, after all, but by his female muse, who reaches out to him via her melody; this is a song not from Davis but to Davis. In that regard, he found a way to express this anima not only in words but through the musical bedrock, bluesy yet ethereal slide that would leap an octave higher at the end to become nothing short of celestial song. And here the use of a knife for a slide, which he would also do, became its own weighted symbol. Davis always carried a knife for protection, but on “Whistlin’ Blues” he would pull it out to coax music, a physical metaphor for the kind of transformative gestures of which the song speaks. Davis, through the myth-abiding integration of his psyche in song, was resting on the knife’s edge, that state of euphoric self-realization which found him accepting the entirety of what he was, man of God and fallible Man. As ritualized in this particular song, Davis heard his life’s call and followed it. Rather than lead to his ruin, it opened unique doors to the music he performed and how he chose to play it.89

89 My limited analysis of “Whistlin’ Blues” was presented to suggest further avenues of inquiry. Generally speaking, an area yet to be fully explored is textual interpretation in the blues from the perspective of analytical psychology – among a short list of such analyses is Mark Winborn’s above-referenced thesis, “Archetypal Aspects of Blues Music”, which argues that blues is a “manifestation and containment of the archetypal field that constitutes unitary reality.” Also needed is further exploration via structuralism and semiotics, two “it” movements that have lost some academic steam in the past few years but which are still relevant for finding deeper meaning in the blues. David Evans’s above-cited article on
GUITAR

Davis played many guitars during his career. His mother paid two-and-a-half dollars for his first guitar when he was seven, and by the age of ten, he recalled making homemade versions. Among his earliest professional guitars was a National steel-bodied guitar, the instrument of choice for street players for its projection and ability to withstand a modicum of abuse. This is the instrument he and Fuller both played on their 1935 ARC recordings, and J. B. Long may possibly have provided each of them with such a guitar for the sessions, though Davis claimed in one interview that Long bought Fuller a National steel for $50 after the ARC date, making no mention if he was given one as well.

Though Davis was documented playing a steel guitar as late as the summer of 1937, he would never record with one again. One explanation is that he sold his National, possibly needing money to relocate to New York, which he did in January 1944. Indeed, in 1943 Davis sold a steel guitar to North Carolina gospel/blues performer Alden “Tarheel Slim” Bunn, who came from Bailey near Raleigh-Durham – and it’s


Reverend Gary Davis, interview by Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold, April/may 1951, TMs (photocopy), the Alan Lomax Archive, New York City, reel 1, side 2, p. 3.

Grossman, Rev. Gary Davis/Blues Guitar, 15. Davis very well may be confusing this memory with that of making other ad hoc stringed instruments such as a banjo from the age of six, which he claimed to have done in other interviews.


tempting to think this was likely the same guitar used on the 1935 sessions.\textsuperscript{94} That this sale enabled his move becomes a more probable scenario when weighed against a conversation he had with his wife Annie about how he followed her to New York.

Annie Davis: How did you come, dear? You came by Travelers’ Aid, didn’t you? Isn’t that what you call it?

Gary Davis: Not necessarily. I come on my own hook.\textsuperscript{95}

By 1945, when Davis next recorded, he was playing a wooden acoustic model instrument, a preference he maintained the rest of his career. Though he relied to an extent on the kindness of guitar stores and acquaintances in supplying instruments, he had, like any musician, strong preferences. He liked a robust-sounding guitar and one that had a 14-fret neck, which made it easier to take advantage of the full range of the instrument, especially in the upper register where he frequently played. Said Davis of his desire for a long guitar neck: “I need to stretch out too much up there.”\textsuperscript{96} Specifically, he liked the full-bodied Gibson J-200, the heaviest and largest of Gibson flat-tops, which he equipped for further power by applying heavy gauge bronze strings.\textsuperscript{97} Debuting in 1938 as the instrument of singing cowboy Ray Whitley, the SJ-200 had a 17-inch body width and was dubbed 200 for the price ($200).\textsuperscript{98} It was initially marketed to country musicians

\textsuperscript{94}Pete Lowry, liner notes, Tarheel Slim, No Time At All (Trix Records 3310, 1975; reissued 1993).

\textsuperscript{95}Interview by Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold, reel 3, part 2, p. 1.


\textsuperscript{97}Dean Meredith, “Reverend Gary Davis Guitar Style,” 32. Davis liked heavy gauge Gibson or La Bella strings though he was also known to use silk-and-steel; see Robert Tilling, “Reverend Gary Davis,” Acoustic Guitar (November/December 1994): 121.

as a top-of-the-line instrument,\textsuperscript{99} and a sense of status might have played into Davis’s choice of that guitar as his favorite. Mostly, such an instrument would have aided Davis in his ability to be heard above the harsh and indifferent distractions of a typical street setting, where he also honed a sound to match, one full of resonance, sustain, and projection.\textsuperscript{100} Davis’s love for the J-200 was wonderfully recalled by the late Eric von Schmidt, who told how Davis came by a certain J-200 thanks to his manager Manny Greenhill:

One afternoon Manny (Greenhill, Davis’s manager) received a desperate phone call, from the manager of Wurlitzer’s, one of Boston’s most staid and respected music stores, more used to selling Steinways than guitars. A quavering voice explained that there was an elderly man, a minister of some sort, who had seized the most expensive guitar in the store and refused to give it back. The man had tried out several models, had chosen the top-of-the-line Gibson, and had been there for some time talking to it, playing spirituals, and singing in a loud voice. No one would dare take it away from him. “He says he has no money, but he gave me your name, Mr. Greenhill, as his manager. He is upsetting the other customers. What shall we do?” Manny bought him the guitar.\textsuperscript{101}

Davis also enjoyed playing a twelve-string guitar, and frequently deferred to that type of guitar later in life. It became so linked to his musical persona that the obituary released to media by Biograph Records also identified Davis as “a professional player of the twelve string guitar.”\textsuperscript{102} It first showed up in his recorded repertoire in 1961 on his third Prestige album, \textit{Say No to the Devil}, which included twelve-string versions of “Time Is Drawing Near” and “Lost Boy in the Wilderness” – this was also the album on

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{100}Meredith, “Reverend Gary Davis Guitar Style,” 32.
\item \textsuperscript{101}von Schmidt with Kruth, “Remembering Reverend Gary Davis,” 69.
\end{itemize}
which Davis’s harmonica playing first appeared – and by 1962, Davis was documented playing a twelve-string on numerous occasions, including his entire set at Pennsylvania’s Swarthmore College, and his set at San Diego’s Sign of the Sun, on which Davis had borrowed a twelve-string with the top B and E doubled courses removed, which resulted in a 10-string guitar.\(^{103}\) By 1970, Davis was playing a twelve-string almost exclusively, as can be heard on his final studio album and most documented live dates from this period. Davis had a Gibson twelve-string at one point but ultimately settled on a Bozo, which he purchased in late 1969 or early 1970 from then-Chicago-based luthier Bozo Podunavac, who had migrated from Yugoslavia to the United States in 1959 and had earned a reputation in the 1960s for his beautifully-crafted, robust-sounding instruments.\(^{104}\) Podunavac provided Davis with the same design he had made for Leo Kottke,\(^{105}\) and Davis used it notably on his last studio sessions in 1971 for Biograph. Roy Book Binder had brought Davis to the shop, where Podunavac was willing to give the blind musician a discount. A prideful Davis countered, “I’d accept a discount if I didn’t have the money but this is your living. Since I have the money, I’d be ashamed to accept a discount. If I didn’t like the guitar, I wouldn’t take it if you gave it to me. Because I like it, I expect to pay the full price.”\(^{106}\)

Whether Davis acquired a fondness for the twelve-string through his New York association with Lead Belly, or because of exposure to it growing up in the South, where it was preferred by a Georgia school of bluesmen led by Blind Willie McTell and

\(^{103}\)Lou Curtiss, telephone conversation with author, 30 October 2009.

\(^{104}\)Davis scholar and acquaintance Robert Tilling cites the year as 1970; see Tilling, “Reverend Gary Davis,” *Acoustic Guitar*, 121.

\(^{105}\)Bozo Podunavac, telephone conversation with author, 30 October 2009.

\(^{106}\)Tilling, ‘Oh, What a Beautiful City’, 57.
Barbecue Bob, is hard to say. No one I interviewed seemed to have an answer. Davis did travel through Georgia at least once, culminating in a notorious trip to Augusta (recounted in Chapter Two). But he never mentioned coming into contact with any Georgian bluesmen, and hardly anyone played a twelve-string from the Carolina blues tradition (Lil McClinton having been an exception). Piedmont transplant Buddy Moss, on the other hand, played a six-string. Davis told Grossman that he first heard a twelve-string in 1920, but didn’t like playing them back then since Stellas and other such instruments had poor string action. Only in the 1960s did he rely more and more on the instrument in what must have been something of a practical consideration. For an aging guitarist, playing a twelve-string would have had its advantages. Folk blues musicians typically tuned lower on a twelve-string to avoid undue pressure on the guitar top (McTell, for example, tuned anywhere from a half-step to four steps low). Davis did the same, usually a step or step-and-a-half below standard, which would have not only made fretting easier but would have taken the edge off the upper register of his voice. Yet it’s just as probable that Davis simply liked the fuller sound of a twelve-string, especially in the form of his well-made Bozo, and enjoyed the timbral complexity and melodic suggestiveness of a twelve-string’s doubled courses, or string pairs. A twelve-string also enhanced the rhythmic and melodic qualities of his already intricate style, sending what was a busy style into jangly overdrive (though on the minus side, the twelve-string also dulled at times the crisp counterpoint and layered activity in Davis’s playing). In addition, Davis no doubt witnessed the attention Lead Belly garnered playing the twelve-

\[\text{\textsuperscript{107}}\text{Blind Willie McTell apparently had been convinced by onetime Lead Belly guitar partner Blind Lemon Jefferson to switch from a six- to a twelve-string guitar; see David Evans, “Blind Willie McTell” in liner notes to }\text{Atlanta Blues: 1933} (JEMF-106, 1979), 9-10.\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{108}}\text{Grossman, }\text{Rev. Gary Davis/Blues Guitar}, 16.\]
string and possibly adopted it for his own, thinking the many fans of the instrument in folk circles would be more inclined to listen. As a likely result then of a combination of factors, Davis performed on a twelve-string with increased regularity beginning in the early 1960s, playing it, however, in the same manner that he played the 6-string, i.e., transferring 6-string left and right hand fingerings, chord shapes, and repertoire without much alteration or re-arrangement.

SINGING

The guitar wizardry of Davis so dominates discussions about him that little consideration is usually given to his singing, a situation not unlike that of B.B. King, whose pioneering guitar work tends to overshadow his equally persuasive vocal abilities. For Davis, this is unfortunately ironic given that his music was mostly religious, mostly sung, and mostly about communicating a message conveyed through words and melody.

Folk music writer Milton Okun has been among the few to bestow outright praise for Davis’s singing, noting: “The voice of Gary Davis is one of the rare and wonderful folk instruments of our time, a mahogany baritone that is often scratchy with wear and age and yet always with the luster of a great antique. His careening dynamics, his shouts, rasps, flutters and melancholy swoops have entranced young urban listeners as few country-born performers have.”109 John Cohen, who recorded Davis pre-fame in the early 1950s, was equally impressed: “Initially I was blown away by his guitar but eventually came to be most moved by his singing, which at times resembled Ray Charles’s great

vocal style.\(^\text{110}\) In later years, that feeling has held true for a few others, including music author Tom Moon, whose nomination of *Harlem Street Singer* as one of the “1,000 recordings to hear before you die” has as much to do with the “great vigor” of Davis’s singing as it does his guitar work.\(^\text{111}\)

Usually, if Davis the singer is addressed, it is in the form of polite dismissal, as in one reviewer who wrote, “The late Rev. Davis was of course, a guitarist of considerable talent, though his singing was nothing exceptional.”\(^\text{112}\) True enough, his vocal talents were rough around the edges, the result, it has been argued, of being a street musician/evangelist where harsh outdoor conditions took their toll on a performer’s vocal cords. This raspy and weathered vocal quality then became a style trait among such musicians.\(^\text{113}\)

While there is some merit to the assertion, Davis’s rough-hewn vocal style can be explained in other ways. For starters, the use of complex extremes of timbre in vocal and instrumental music is generally the norm in vernacular African American music, a cultural reinterpretation of African aesthetics and musical practice, explained in part by an African musical preference for imitation of nature and a desire to express the totality of life experience in song.\(^\text{114}\) More specifically, such singing was associated with


\(^{112}\)Jim DeKoster, review of *Children of Zion*, *Living Blues* 24 (November-December 1975): 43.


Pentecostal singing and, by extension, street evangelism. Even Baptists at the time (of which Davis was one) were adopting a more emotional vocal tone as a result of the Pentecostal influence. For gospel singers from the church to the street, from Bessie Johnson to Blind Willie Johnson, the purpose of the music demanded vocal mannerisms at once forceful, gruff, and often lacking in tonal purity. The hardscrabble setting of the urban outdoors was merely one component in that singing had to be heard over the many distractions and noises of the street. Placing a value on power over prettiness, a voice had to be riveting to grab the attention of passersby, converts and tippers alike. But most importantly, such singing as heard in the evangelists, whether on the street or in a Holiness church, came from a place of exalted emotion, an outpouring of spiritual fervor that could only be expressed in the full exploitation of one’s vocal range and abilities: music as a burning bush that projected inner strength and determination as well as the outward goals of proselytizing.

Davis’s singing adheres to the above criteria and, as such, is given not only historical legitimacy but succeeds on its own terms as a ministering instrument. A great example is his performance of “Twelve Gates to the City” at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival (see below under variation for further discussion). This spiritual was a signature tune in Davis’s vast catalog, one he performed with frequency from his debut 1935 sessions to his death, and one that demonstrated perhaps more than any other song his considerable ideas and technical prowess in the first position chord shape/key of A on the guitar. While the guitar often dominates the vocal in many versions of this song, at Newport before a responsive audience, Davis the gospel singer was in his element,

syncopating phrases with rushed, anticipatory entrances and hitting head voice notes he rarely attempted elsewhere when he played the song. In the process, he gave one of his masterly vocal performances, a praise song of the highest order.

Example 3.24. Reverend Gary Davis, “Twelve Gates to the City.” CD track time 2:30-3:00. From Reverend Gary Davis, Live at Newport (Vanguard Records 79588-2, 2001); original recording 1965. Vocal line only; h. v. = head voice. Actual pitch is closer to B-flat.

As “Twelve Gates” suggests, gospel music encouraged a vocal range for Davis that he never exhibited in his secular songs. One explanation: where his blues and secular lyric song could be philosophically inward and self-reflective, his gospel material required an outward reach, a push of vocal limits that fell in line with the evangelical mission of the music. In looking at the choice of G and C as the most utilized keys by Davis for his sacred song, those keys gave the singer – who could comfortably reach a
high G (g’) vocally – the two keys where that note best sits as a clarion call for dynamic exuberance and hair-raising conviction, the pivotal note of both tension (as the dominant in C) and resolution (as the tonic in G).

As for his secular singing, particularly blues, suffice to say here that such music when performed by Davis possessed more limited vocal lines if and when he sang them at all. This was largely due, I argue elsewhere, to Davis’s reluctance to sing blues later in life (though he had no problem playing them on the guitar). Yet Davis’s narrower tessitura and less-than-emphatic vocal delivery of secular music was compounded by a vocal ease consistent with other Piedmont players such as Fuller and Blake, who sang in a similar manner; indeed, a relaxed vocal delivery is but one aspect of an overall lightness of style among East Coast players – attributed in part to the priority given instrumental virtuosity116 – at least when compared to the often more intense vocalisms of Deep South and Texas players like Charley Patton, Son House, and even Blind Lemon Jefferson.

Listen to Son House, for example, sing “Preaching the Blues,” and his commitment to the topic is never in doubt. A persuasive blues performance involves inhabiting the song, going to that place of total submission to the philosophy of the blues, something Davis, as a preacher, would not and could not do. He played blues, but with a detachment that involved speaking the lines as if from the sidelines rather than acting as a true participant. Perhaps that is also why his blues are, to the ears of this writer, at times his least convincing performances, a conceit to his students and his overall legacy but no longer a concern of the heart.

116Evans, Big Road Blues, 168.
STYLE: BLUES AND GOSPEL

A comparative look at Davis and his prewar peers shows that his musical abilities developed within several musical traditions in the Piedmont and, at large, the African American South. One was from the secular side – the pre-blues and emerging blues styles of the turn of the century – and the other from the sacred side – notably the music of the guitar evangelists. Yet, while Davis drew from both traditions, he walked a philosophical and musical fence between the two that made alliances with neither.

Given that both styles often co-existed on a street level vying for the same attention and pocket change, and that many bluesmen became evangelists and/or preachers during their musical lives, it’s not surprising to find a certain amount of shared stylistic tendencies between such sacred and secular traditions on the guitar. As discussed in the chapter on blues, the number of prewar blues guitarists who switched primarily to gospel performances after rejoining the church or becoming reengaged in their Christian faith was many indeed. As a result, the music of each could have a similarity of sound at times, something Davis demonstrated more than once, whether calling on the same A-shape riffs for “I’m Throwing Up My Hands’ and “Twelve Gates to the City” at his 1935 sessions, or setting “Talk on the Corner” and the turnaround in “Lo, I Be with You Always” to the same rag-imbued I-vi-V7/V-V progression.

Yet a brief survey of secular and sacred recorded traditions also points out decided differences between the two beyond textual content.

And here we might mention several factors that mute to a degree the following observations, based as they are on recorded musical examples by prewar stylists. First, Davis had essentially given up playing blues by the time he was enticed into a recording
studio. Had he given ARC more of what they apparently wanted – blues – his prewar output might better resemble that of others in the Piedmont pantheon. Second, he outlived many of his contemporaries and was able to distinguish himself as a result – we’ll never know, for example, what Willie Walker (born like Davis in 1896 but who died in 1933) would have sounded like or what sort of influence he would have wielded had he survived into the folk revival like his onetime band mate. Third, it’s impossible to gauge how much of the blues-heavy repertoires of guitarists like Blind Boy Fuller reflected the tastes and stylistic range of an individual versus the demands of a recording industry that had learned to effectively market and sell blues during the initial wave of female vaudeville singers. Labels then continued the formula with, among others, black vernacular guitarists, in essence helping create a tradition that was arguably less traditional than it was commercial. For example, many such guitarists, Fuller included, sounded at times like Blind Blake, which arguably had less to do with regional style than with the fact that Blake’s music was so popular and readily imitated. We are fortunate that Davis lived as long as he did, for only in his celebrated final years did he reveal the totality of who he was as a musician, one whose musicality was much more varied than the imposed dichotomy of gospel and blues in race recordings (or even “traditional song” distinctions made by folklorists). A number of bluesmen, for example, were reported having musical versatility far greater than their recordings and careers suggested. They were entertainers, after all, and would have played the hits of the day along with tunes of regional appeal. Chapel Hill, North Carolina, black string band the Chapel Hillbillies, for example, played blues at musical functions but also performed popular favorites “Indian Love Call”, “Wreck of Old 97,” and “Sweet Georgia Brown.”

mystique if not mythology, Robert Johnson apparently knew a jukebox’s worth of material from cowboy tunes to songs by Jimmie Rodgers and Bing Crosby to standards like “My Blue Heaven” and “Yes Sir, That’s My Baby.” Recalling Johnson’s versatility, Johnny Shines explained why they both would pepper their blues with popular song, polka music included:

You’ve said that Robert Johnson played polka music on guitar.

Shines: You had to do it. You see, when I come along playing guitar, lots of times you wake up in the morning and you didn’t have no money at all. Somebody ask you to play a song, maybe they’d give you a dollar for that song. That meant about four meals off of a dollar, ’cause you could get a meal for a quarter or 30 cents. And if you couldn’t play that song, you miss that money. So you had to learn to play some of everything you heard. If we passed a white dancing hall and the big bands was playing in there, whatsoever kind of music they was playing, we used to have to listen to. Hide around outside and listen. So we’d go home, and when we get ready, we’d play those same pieces.

So when you were working the streets with Johnson, you only played blues once in a while.

Lots of popular songs in between – whatsoever the people seemed like they enjoyed more. When we played for Polish people, we had to play Polish music. I learned “Beer Barrel Polka,” “Too Fat Polka,” as well as a few Jewish tunes. We had to learn them, too.

Shines also told Sparky Rucker that Johnson “had one of the sweetest versions of ‘Danny Boy’ that you’d ever want to hear. It was basically the guys who did the

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recordings that’d only want to hear blues from these guys. They’d say, ‘Play me all your blues songs.’”

During his pre-fame tenure as a working Mississippi musician on Stovall’s Plantation, electric blues pioneer Muddy Waters entertained his Southern audiences playing blues but also Gene Autry tunes and pop/jazz fare such as “Chattanooga Choo-Choo,” “Red Sails in the Sunset,” “Darktown Strutter’s Ball,” and “Missouri Waltz.”

That such claims were likely true is supported by the example of Davis, who was recorded playing both “Yes Sir, That’s My Baby” and “Darktown Strutter’s Ball,” in addition to copious other pop, jazz, and vaudeville numbers from the turn of the century, not to mention someone like Josh White, whose repertoire became increasingly pop-oriented following his race records career. Finally, given that East Coast guitarists were underrepresented on record, compared to those documented elsewhere by prewar labels, we are likely to never have a complete picture of the early Piedmont blues guitar scene, especially the variety of repertoire they cultivated and practiced in addition to their commercial output. That said, the recordings we do have speak of much musical activity contained by geographic region and, to a great degree, regional style.

In contrast to Deep South and Texas styles, an East Coast or Piedmont guitar blues style generally entailed to a larger degree the following traits: the influence of

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122Issues regarding geography and how it contributes to musical style are plenty when discussing a perceived Piedmont or East Coast blues sound. This paper doesn’t attempt to address those concerns. For an excellent and thoughtful look at the implications of equating musical style to geographic region, see David Evans, “Hill Country Blues,” Living Blues 38, no. 2 (April 2007): 76-81.
ragtime as well as string band forms, tunes and style; predominant use of standard tuning; a more involved harmonic language including heightened melodic and harmonic chromaticism; some counterpoint; tendency toward virtuosity; the display of instrumental choruses and breaks; more blues rags and eight-bar blues forms beyond prevailing twelve-bar structures but also the use of rag turnarounds in other forms; a generally strict adherence to such metric structures; little use of slide technique or riffs; preference for alternating thumb fingerpicking patterns with drop thumb accents; typically faster tempos; the favoring of C and G keys/chord shapes in open position (the preferred blues rag settings); less intensity of expression; and, consequently, an overall lightness in attack and feel.\textsuperscript{123}

A table of prewar Piedmont blues guitarists (Table 1 below) confirms a number of the above aspects pertaining to style and repertoire. Examined were 320 songs recorded between 1926 and 1942 by nine selected Piedmont guitar blues acts. The considered performers/duos include Blake as well as Davis and his immediate circle – Willie Walker and Josh White in Greenville, Pink Anderson and Simmie Dooley in Spartanburg, and Durham-associated players Blind Boy Fuller, Floyd Council, and Richard and Willy Trice. The Atlanta scene (Blind Willie McTell, Robert “Barbecue Bob” Hicks, et al.) was not included, since its own set of traits and predilections such as the frequent use of

\textsuperscript{123}Piedmont blues scholar Barry Lee Pearson seems to think that certain traits of the East Coast style, such as less vocal intensity compared to Deep South and Texas styles, were the result of a higher level of interaction between the races in the East including the black and white audiences for which black musicians played. Indeed, Davis was not alone in having played for both white and black revelers alike, which demanded a versatile repertoire as a result. Yet this was not a unique situation, and black musicians played for white patrons in other regions as well. Politico E. H. Crump, for example, famously booked the Memphis Jug Band for events. Pearson also feels the music was shaped to a degree by less harsh living conditions between blacks and whites in the Piedmont; see Barry Lee Pearson, “Appalachian Blues,” \textit{Black Music Research Journal} 23, no. 1/2 (Spring/Fall 2003): 34. That latter observation may have been the case in certain pockets of the Eastern South, but everything Davis had to say of his experiences as a young man in the Carolinas, not to mention the plentiful data on Jim Crow-era violence in, especially, South Carolina contradicts such a benevolent assumption.
twelve-string guitar, open tunings, and slide makes the Georgia contingent a significantly separate subgenre within the overall Piedmont sound. Case in point, Buddy Moss, who traveled among both worlds reinforces the Carolina findings in regard to form – 55 issued titles between 1933 and 1941, all blues, 47 of those twelve-bar, and 35 in AAa (see Appendix 8) – though certain elements of style veer from the Carolinas, such as the dominance of two guitar settings (32); the preference of A and E shapes (18 each) and subsequent lack of C and G (5 and 3 respectively); tuning below standard pitch (on at least 30 tunes, which was in line with the twelve-string guitar practice of Georgia players even though Moss played a six-string throughout); and the Georgian penchant for slide guitar and open tunings, which dominated Moss’s early sessions (9 of his first 11 recordings).
### TABLE 1. COMPARATIVE LIST OF PREWAR PIEDMONT BLUES GUITARISTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Year(s)</th>
<th>#Differently issued songs</th>
<th>#Blues + metrical and lyrical forms</th>
<th>#Religious songs/religious parody</th>
<th>Guitar keys/tunings (of blues songs)</th>
<th>Predominant use of open position</th>
<th>Blues setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Blind Blake | 1926-1932 | 75
            | 70: **Meter:**
            | a) 12-bar (52)
            | b) blues rags (9)
            | c) 8-bar (4 of non-rag variety)
            | d) 16 bar (5)
            | **Lyric:**
            | a) AAa (41)
            | b) refrain type (13)
            | c) other (5)
|            |          | None/none
|            |          | C (43)
            | G (16)
            | F (4)
            | A (2)
            | drop D (2)
            | E (1)
            | Am (1)
            | open D (1)
|            |          | **all**
|            |          | solo (54)
            | duo (14)
            | trio+ (2)
            | sung
            |            | (59)
            | instr. (11)

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1. Selected artists were chosen as representative of the prewar Piedmont blues guitar sound as then documented by the commercial recording industry, which admittedly did not record East Coast blues guitarists in the same quantity as Deep South and Texas stylists. This chart does not count alternate takes, “Part 2” sides of 78s, later re-recordings of a particular tune (as in the additions of “No. 2” or “New” to the title), numbers that are essentially the same as a previous song but with a new title, and sides where the artist is relegated to backing musician accompanying someone else.

2. Referring to key here is a term of convenience. For starters, actual pitch could vary greatly, especially in someone like Blind Willie McTell, who consistently tuned his twelve-string guitar below standard pitch, or Josh White, who dropped the strings in his preferred open D tuning down as far as B-flat. Blind Boy Fuller, on the other hand, used with great frequency a capo twist to adjust pitch. In such cases, chord shape is what’s considered, not pitch. For example, a song played in a C shape but capoed up to F is still considered C for the chart’s purpose.

3. By predominant use of open position, I mean that the song is played largely on the first few frets (either by the nut or by a capo) using chords that combine open and fretted strings. This does not consider higher position riffs and solos on the top strings that may appear within the course of a song, but simply the structural body of the arrangement, i.e., music that is played under the singer’s melody.

4. This number does not take into account two “Part 2” and “No. 2” sides, nor 18 sides where he backed Leola Wilson, Bertha Henderson, Elzadie Robinson, Irene Scruggs, Laura Rucker, and Daniel Brown.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2. Pink Anderson and Simmie Dooley</th>
<th>1928</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>2: Meter: a) 8-bar (1) b) 16-bar (1) Lyric: a) aa (1) b) AAAAA (1)</th>
<th>none</th>
<th>E (1) D (1)</th>
<th>all</th>
<th>duo (2) sung (2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. Willie Walker</td>
<td>1930</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2: 8-bar blues rag, a/aB (1) 12-bar, AAAAA (1)</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>C (1) G (1)</td>
<td>all</td>
<td>duo (2) sung (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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5Blake accompanied Daniel Brown for one religious number, “Beulah Land.”

6Blake makes considerable use of higher positions on the guitar in his one open-tuned number, “Police Dog Blues.” He also favors chromatic walk-downs of diminished chords when playing in a C shape, such as his introduction to “Righteous Blues,” and the occasional fifth-position bend when playing in a D shape. Yet even in those examples, the majority of guitar activity takes place in first position.

7Ninth-position playing occurs, however, in “Every Day in the Week Blues.”

8Dooley plays second guitar on two performances and kazoo on two.

9Both songs are played by Walker with a capo at the fifth fret and played in C and G chord shapes but pitched at F and C respectively.
| 4. Josh White | 1932-1942<sup>10</sup> | 89 | 54: Meter:<br>a) 12-bar (44)<br>b) 8-bar (4)<br>c) 18-bar blues<br>rag (1)<br>d) other:<br>10-bar (1)<br>12½-bar (1)<br>16-bar (3)<br>Lyric<br>a) A-Aa (40)<br>b) refrain type (7)<br>c) other (7) | 27/none | A (25)<br>Open D (18)<br>E (10)<br>C (1)<sup>11</sup> | all but one<sup>12</sup> | solo (26)<br>duo (19)<br>trio+ (9)<br>sung (all) |

<sup>10</sup>In the early-to-mid 1940s, White’s musical choices took on a much more urban, even pop, tone, especially from his 1944 sessions on, and have not been considered in the above table, which examines the guitarists through something of a Piedmont lens stylistically. For example during the years 1944-1946, White recorded only 19 blues and two gospel numbers compared to 33 examples of topical numbers, pop and jazz tunes, and ballads.

<sup>11</sup>The one blues number in C (and White’s only prewar blues rag), “Baby, Won’t You Doodle-Doo-Doo,” was played from an eighth-position C chord made in the manner of a clutched F or G shape not unlike how Gary Davis made such chords.

<sup>12</sup>See note 10.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5. Blind Boy Fuller</th>
<th>1935-1940</th>
<th>120(^{13})</th>
<th>Meter:</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>a) 12-bar (72)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>b) blues rag (19)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>c) 8-bar (13)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>d) other:</td>
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<td>9-bar (1)</td>
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<td>9 ½-bar (1)</td>
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<td>10-bar (1)</td>
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<td>11 ½-bar (2)</td>
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<td>15-bar (1)</td>
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<td>20-bar (1)</td>
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<td>Lyric:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>a) AAa (53)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>b) refrain type (30)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>c) aA (8)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>d) AAb/bA(^A) (7)</td>
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<td>e) other (17)</td>
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<td>E (31)</td>
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<td>C (30)</td>
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<td>A (27)</td>
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<td>open D (4 – 3 of those with slide)</td>
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<td>all(^{14})</td>
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<td>solo (70)</td>
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<td>duo (30)</td>
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<td>trio (15)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>sung(114)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>instr. (1)</td>
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\(^{13}\) Fuller led all of his sessions save for a reading of "Precious Lord" in which he backed Bull City Red. In addition, eight alternate takes were not counted.

\(^{14}\) Fuller, however, used a capo on at least 57 performances. He possibly used a capo on another 35 songs where the pitch varies by a raised half-step (of the few photographs we have of Fuller playing a guitar, one clearly shows a capo on the first fret). If that is the case, it would account for more than 75% of his
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. Blind Gary</td>
<td>1935</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2, both 12-bar, A Aa</td>
<td>12/none</td>
<td>A (1) E (1)</td>
<td>all but one</td>
<td>solo (2) sung (2)</td>
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</table>
| 7. Floyd Council | 1937 | 6 | 6: 
   Meter: 12-bar (all) 
   Lyric: A Aa (4) 
   Refrain type (1) | none | A (2) E (2) G (1) C (1) | all | solo (6) sung (6) |
| 8. Willy Trice | 1937 | 2 | 2: 
   Meter: 12 ½-bar (1) 
   10-bar (1) 
   Lyric: refrain type (2) | none | E (2) both capoed to G | all | solo (2) sung (2) |

repertoire. As it is, he used a capo on nearly 50% of his recorded performances, favoring (assuming he was in standard pitch) the third fret (26), second (20), fifth (9), and fourth (3). It’s worth noting that he kept his capo predominantly in one position on any given session.

15This does not include Davis as second guitarist or accompanist.

16One song, “The Angel’s Message to Me,” is played out of first position F, a shape Davis would apply with increasingly regularity from the 1950s on in the key of G out of third position.
| 9. Richard Trice | 1937 | 8 | 8: Meter:1⁷  
11-bar (1)  
12 ½-bar (1)  
13-bar (4)  
13 ½-bar (1)  
14-bar (1)  
Lyric:  
AAa (4)  
refrain type (3)  
other (1) | none | E (3)  
A (2)  
C (1)  
G (1)  
D (1) | 6₁⁸ | solo (8)  
sung (8) |

1⁷Seven of Trice's eight songs would otherwise be 12-bar forms but for his idiosyncratic approach to rhythm, especially his penchant for playing an extra measure before starting a verse. The eighth is essentially an eight-bar form with extended measures making it an 11-bar form. His ability in keeping such metrical oddities consistent throughout a performance is remarkable, however, begging the observation that, far from being rhythmically challenged, he was a conscious stylist.

1⁸Tuned a step low and played in an open-position D shape, “Shake Your Stuff” operates from a seventh-position D chord (A shape) for the opening measures of the blues structure; also “Trembling Bed Springs” uses a fifths-position IV chord.
The above table confirms certain tendencies. First, the overwhelming form was blues. Specifically 261, or 81.56%, were blues of some type (and only Josh White’s high number of religious songs skews what would have otherwise been closer to nine in ten songs being a blues). Not counting such variants as twelve-and-a-half and thirteen-bar blues, 177 of all blues, or 67.81%, are strictly twelve-bar metric structures, and 145, or 55.55%, are in an AAa (a.k.a., AAB) lyric rhyming scheme; even more telling, 79.66% of all the twelve-bar blues here are of the AAa type.\(^{124}\) In addition, almost all performances were sung (249, or 95.4%), and most played in a solo setting (168, or 64.36%).

Key preference percentages, of course, are partly the result of the guitar’s possibilities/limitations. In standard tuning, there are only so many options for chord shapes played in open and first position, so it should come as no surprise to find favored keys. Yet other keys are virtually ignored such as easy-to-execute minor chords like D minor and E minor, or even D major, of which there were only 2.3% of such Piedmont blues in the chart. In this latter case, tuning and ease of key seem to matter less than matters of style and musical rhetoric – pre-war guitar blues simply worked better in some keys than others. Case in point, open D was rarely used (23, or 8.8%) compared to the abundant use of that tuning by guitar evangelists. In addition, most of the chart’s players preferred anywhere from one to three chord shapes with a smattering of other formations. For example, 84.29% of all blues by Blind Blake were either in C (43, or 61.43%) or G (16, or 22.86%), while 79.63% of Josh White’s blues were either in A (25, or 46.3%) or open D (18, or 33%) – open D being White’s overall favored tuning when his sacred numbers are factored in (41, or 46.1%). One exception was Fuller, who used a healthy

\(^{124}\)See my thoughts in Chapter One on the use of AAa instead of the more familiar AAB to delineate the standard blues lyric rhyme scheme.
balance of four chord shapes for his blues: 31 in C (26.96%); 30 in E (26.09%); 27 in A (23.48%); and 19 in G (16.52%). Combined with the larger diversity he displayed in his blues lyric structures, Fuller may have been, arguably, the most creative artist to work within the form, employing more song types and chord formations than any other East Coast bluesman from the era. A full chord tally from the chart shows that the most preferred chord shape/key for Piedmont blues guitarists was C (77, or 29.5%), followed by A (59, or 22.6%), E (51, or 19.54%), and G (38, or 13.6%). This makes sense given the built-in bluesy aspects of E and A played in standard tuning as well as the inherent rag aspects presented by playing in C and G – and here we might bring in the greatest and most prolific of the Georgian bluesmen, Blind Willie McTell, who also conformed to the above observation, having played 36 songs (or 37.89% of the 95 different tunes he recorded between 1927 and 1940) in C, followed by open D (17, or 17.89%), E (16, or 16.84%), and G (12, or 12.63%). Not only that, but almost all operated from open and first position with excursions sometimes up the neck for solos or riffs. Davis was the same in that regard for his blues, reinforcing the idea that gospel music gave him the vocabulary to expand harmonically up the neck the way he did. Therefore, if we reduce the above down to a single most common type, then, what we have is a sung, solo-performed twelve-bar, AAa structure played in the keys of C, G, E or A, a Piedmont blues pattern that, that despite regional and personal differences, nonetheless conformed to the larger prewar commercial guitar blues scene at the time.

Just as interesting is what’s not here. Most surprising is the lack of blues rags, the seeming essence, after all, of a Piedmont blues style. Only 30, or 11.5%, are of this type with almost all split between Blake (9, or 12.86% of his blues output) and Fuller (19, or
16.92% of his blues output). Furthermore, only Blind Blake cultivated an instrumental repertoire of any substance, recording 13 such tunes, almost evenly split between blues rag and twelve-bar forms – Fuller, by contrast, only recorded one instrumental, “Jitterbug Rag.” By contrast, only in his later years did Davis share the many instrumental folk and blues rags he knew such as “Devil’s Dream,” “Buck Rag,” “Twelve Sticks,” and the Willie Walker-gleaned “Maple Leaf Rag” and “Cincinnati Flow Rag.” Also, with the exception of Josh White who crafted split personalities for a number of his secular and sacred sides, very few Piedmont blues guitarists recorded religious material during their commercial heydays – Fuller was an exception with five examples as a leader, as was Blind Willie McTell, who recorded 12 sacred sides among the 91 he made between 1927 and 1940, and there was Davis, of course, who should probably be thought of more as a religious artist who dipped into the blues well from time to time. No one cut any religious parody a la Frank Stokes’s “You Shall,” though Blake backed Daniel Brown for the 1928 pseudo-gospel number “Beulah Land” (oddly enough, Davis showed a surprising affinity for such material with a private, late 1960s performance of the vaudeville number “Pray for the Lights to Go Out”). There was very little slide playing from the Piedmont bluesmen outside Georgia, which makes sense since very few alternate or open tunings were used beyond the Atlanta players. Fuller had only three slide pieces in 120 performances, for example, while White had only one despite open D having been his most used tuning). There was little use of minor chords, Blake’s “Rope Stretchin’ Blues” in A minor being a rare example (though it modulates to the relative major in the course of the song), followed by two from McTell and several examples by White, all from 1940 and mostly non-blues. Finally, the key of F – Davis’s third most preferred chord shape –
shows up in only four blues by his Piedmont peers (1.5%), all courtesy of Blake (two in the role of accompanying a pianist).

Given the above information, it appears that Davis was both informed by his surroundings and informing on them. Certain guitar flourishes, for example, appear to have been the result of regional preferences. Musical ideas associated with Davis in the key of A, such as his penchant for resolving the tonic as a first inversion chord, were used by other players as well, including Blind Boy Fuller and Richard Trice. Also, the opening string of triadic eighth-note triplets Davis played in his two signature blues from 1935 was an introductory gesture favored by a number of Carolina prewar blues guitarists including Blind Boy Fuller (one-third of his recorded output), Floyd Council (all six of his solo 1937 sides), Bull City Red, Richard Trice, and Josh White. Further, it is a trait heard much less outside of Carolina players, absent, for instance, in the music of Blind Willie McTell, Blind Blake, and Blind Lemon Jefferson. Not to be confused with a typical quarter/eighth-note triplet pattern, which was ubiquitous in its blues usage, the articulation of eighth-note triplets as played by Carolina guitarists was something slightly different, both more urgent in its feel due to the forcefulness of the rhythm and more light-sounding as well given the major-third that rides the top of a full major triad in such cases. The appearance of this triplet idea at the beginning of so many Carolina guitar blues would have provided a few things: a way to establish tempo, tonality, feel, and perhaps even lyric organization in one’s mind before the singing started, but also acting as a type of identifier, an up-front marker of regional character and style for listeners.

The following examples by Davis, Fuller, and Council show that not only did they use this triplet in near identical fashion when playing in A but they also resolved it in
very similar ways, using the high open E string to get from ninth to open position before sliding into the A chord through parallel harmonic movement from a half step below.


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Davis willingly admitted the influence of onetime string band associate Willie Walker on his style and repertoire, acknowledging that he picked up such signature tunes as “Maple Leaf Rag” (a.k.a., “Make Believe Stunt”) and “Cincinnati Flow Rag” from the fellow rag-imbued picker, and while we only have two recordings from Walker – 1930’s “South Carolina Rag” and “Dupree Blues” – it is enough to discern technical and musical parallels with Davis, especially in Walker’s finessed harmonic language and crisp chromatic runs, as in the example below, “Dupree Blues,” where a dexterously descending string of triplets anticipates a fully diminished chord in the final cadence (though Walker, who does lots of string brushing on “Dupree Blues,” appears, at least in this one session, not to have used fingerpicks).

There was also Blind Blake, whom Davis never met but admired enough to kept several of the Piedmont blues master’s songs in his repertoire. These included “That’ll Never Happen No More,” “West Coast Blues,” and “You Gonna Quit Me Baby,” the latter number sung as well in an early 1960s home recording for Stefan Grossman. In that performance he sang four of Blake’s six verses, omitting the two about a chain gang and jail, but adding six of his own including final verses that cap the song’s male-female scenario with violence and infidelity (“If you don’t have me, baby, you won’t have nobody else” and “You gonna quit me, baby, just for some other man”). Like Blake, Davis played most of what he did on guitar in the keys of C and G (86% for Blake, 65%...
for Davis). Yet unlike Davis, Blake played blues of one type or another to the exclusion of almost all other forms and genres; used first and middle finger to fingerpick; and played practically everything in open position with the exception of the diminished chord sequences he favored up the neck in C and the occasional upper fret bend in D – the latter two choices, which at once expanded the parameters of the right hand while limiting the parameters of the left, no doubt aided Blake’s remarkable facility and speed. Also, Blake was more willing to use a capo, which he did at least twice (“Dry Bone Shuffle” and “That Will Never Happen No More”) with a probable four others. Still, in looking at Davis’s influences and musical mentorship, Blake is one of the very few he cited alongside Willie Walker, even if their respective styles were not as closely aligned as their shared love of ragtime phrasing might suggest – and in all fairness, Blake, being the commercial figure he was, loomed large over the playing of many a Piedmont bluesmen, including Fuller and Richard Trice, whose “Pack It Up and Go” borrowed lines from “Righteous Blues,” and whose “Bed Spring Blues” took its drop thumb cue from Blake.

During his five short years as a recording artist, Blind Boy Fuller (1907-1941) was the most successful blues guitarist of the East Coast scene, this at a time when the Depression had severely cut into 78 sales and the Chicago star system was dominating the blues record industry. Fuller met Davis in the early 1930s when both were based in Durham, playing for tips in the tobacco district, and there’s little doubt that Davis – the elder musician by more than ten years – held some amount of musical sway over Fuller, something corroborated by contemporaries Willie Trice and Charles Henry “Baby”

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127Stephen Calt, liner notes, Blind Boy Fuller, Truckin’ My Blues Away (Yazoo 1060, 1990).
Certainly, the fact that Davis had been playing professionally for nearly two decades at the point that Fuller took music seriously in the late 1920s suggests at the very least that Davis was not the one seeking influence.

Davis claimed he taught Fuller in more than one interview, telling Stefan Grossman that Fuller only knew one song played with a knife when he first met him, adding, “He wanted to take some of my training. I’d sit down and he’d come up to my house every day and sit down and play. I taught him how to play. He would have been alright if I kept him under me long enough.” Fuller no doubt knew more than one song at the point that he started hanging around Davis, who seemed to infer that Fuller knew but one tuning. Even then, Fuller probably knew more on guitar than indicated by Davis, who must have felt that he “taught” the protégé to be a better guitarist. Far from coincidence, Fuller began taking his music seriously at 20 around the same time that he went blind; and he probably began, as Davis asserted, by playing slide guitar in an open tuning, one of the established conventions, after all, among street and disabled players, secular and sacred alike. The three slide numbers Fuller recorded in his short career – “Homesick and Lonesome Blues,” “I Don’t Care How Long,” and “I’m a Stranger Here” – give us an indication of what this initial style must have sounded like. All are twelve-bar performances and all are in open D, or Vestapol, which, to the chord-conscious, hypercritical Davis must have sounded like one song.

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130 Grossman, Rev. Gary Davis/Blues Guitar, 12.

131 Bruce Bastin, Red River Blues, 214.
Nonetheless, parallels exist in technique, style, and repertoire between the two musicians. Fuller had his own grab bag of influences, assembled in no small part from listening to records by the likes of Blind Blake, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Buddy Moss, and even Carl Martin, but the Davis imprint was there as well, and showed up with increased frequency the farther removed Fuller was from the 1935 sessions he shared with his mentor (either because Fuller felt more comfortable playing Davis-type material without the source in the same room or that it took Fuller time to develop such ideas to the point that he felt comfortable committing them to record).

Certain similarities reflected regional and/or national tastes such as “Mama, Let Me Lay It on You” (discussed below) and lyrical turns of phrase such as the line Fuller used for “Piccolo Rag” which later showed up in Davis’s version of “Hesitation Blues”: “Said when I’m on the farm hollerin’, ‘Whoa, haw, gee!’/My gal’s uptown hollerin’, ‘Who wants me!’” Where Davis’s impact can best be felt is in the material Fuller played in A, a key Davis taught Fuller, according to Willie Trice. It was among Fuller’s most utilized keys/chord shapes, and 18 of 28 such numbers bear some strong element of Davis’s phrasing/note choices in that shape. Among them were the “Careless Love” rewrite, “Corrine, What Makes You Treat Me So?”, both “If You See My Pigmeat,” and “Big House Bound” with Davis-tailored diminished chord turnarounds (Example 3.29); and “Mamie,” a bold appropriation of “Mountain Jack” replete with its distinctive bass run resolution (Example 3.30).

132 Blind Boy Fuller, “Piccolo Rag” (OKeh 06437, 1938); CD track time 1:02-1:06, from Blind Boy Fuller, 1935-1938 Remastered (JSP Records JSP7735, 2004).

133 Bastin, Red River Blues, 222.
Mostly, Fuller offered streamlined versions of Davis’s ideas, as on his trio version of “Twelve Gates to the City” with Sonny Terry on harmonica and Bull City Red on washboard, replete with its own character and ebullient energy but absent many of Davis’s street evangelist touches such as the emotionally-pitched singing and aggressive bass runs of the verses. Faster and almost dance-like in feel, the performance, despite being a spiritual, offers a good example of how Fuller was able to distill the more complex factors of Davis’s playing into a commercial package that was actually the antithesis of the guitar minister, a style focused on entertaining rather than preaching, blues rather than gospel, and relative simplicity over virtuosity. Was it any wonder Davis felt that Fuller didn’t learn anything he had to show him? Or was it that a jealous Davis,
arguably the better musician, only had a handful of sides to show for his talent versus the hundred-plus sides Fuller put out in five short years? Fuller, after all, left his own immediate impact on the East Coast blues scene from Pink Anderson and Richard Trice to Brownie McGhee, who was billed early on as “Blind Boy Fuller No. 2,” which must have made Davis fume knowing that many of his ideas made Fuller so famous.

Interestingly, the one song on which Fuller most sounded like Davis was “Precious Lord,” the Thomas Dorsey gospel standard that Fuller recorded with Sonny Terry on harmonica and Bull City Red on vocals. As Fuller didn’t sing on this performance, he took the opportunity to use more intricate chord shapes and syncopated voicings in his guitar accompaniment, the kind of shapes for which Davis was known, in fact, intimating that Fuller had learned well from the older musician after all. Fuller recorded only six religious numbers, all from his final year and four from his final session in 1940, and it has been argued that he was leaning on sacred material as his health declined, not unlike the supposed conversion Robert Johnson experienced prior to his death.135

One artist Davis might be expected to have some compatibility with is Josh White (1914-1969), who also came from South Carolina, spent time playing in street-music environs, and balanced secular and sacred repertoires more so than most if not all of his prewar contemporaries. White was a traveling companion/lead boy to many blind musicians in the Greenville area, including Joe Taggart, John Henry “Big Man” Arnold, and...
Columbus Williams, Archie Jackson, and Willie Walker’s brother Joe Walker, yet somewhat surprisingly, he never knew Davis, who had left town by the time the self-described “Greenville Sheik,” some eighteen years younger, had begun backing street players as a boy on tambourine. White himself moved to New York City in 1934, spurred in part by a double lynching he had witnessed, and his music took on an increasingly urbane and socially conscious air once he relocated.\textsuperscript{136} Much of what White played early on was rooted in Piedmont regionalism, such as “She’s a Married Woman,” a. k. a., his version of “Meet Me in the Bottom,” which Buddy Moss originated and others from Fuller (“Boots and Shoes”) to Pink Anderson did as well. There was also the pervasive influence of Blind Blake and Willie Walker in White’s guitar playing plus the general inclusion of Piedmont conventions such as chromaticism, blues rag turnarounds, and use of dropped thumb.

But White – whose own recordings informed players from Blind Boy Fuller and Buddy Moss to Delta legend Robert Johnson – also had his ear tuned to national blues and religious song, particularly the sacred repertoire of Blind Willie Johnson (“Jesus Gonna Make Up My Dyin’ Bed,” “Motherless Children”) and the music and musical execution of J. T. “Funny Paper” Smith (“Howling Wolf Blues,” specifically, but also other tunes in A, which often retained the flavor of Smith’s playing in that key).

With Davis, White shared no blues material, though a handful of religious songs show up in both players’ repertoires: “I Am the True Vine” (which White cut first as “My Father Is a Husbandman” three years after Eddie Head and Family debuted the song on 78), the popular spiritual “Motherless Children,” “Pure Religion Hallilu,” “Paul and Silas

\textsuperscript{136}See Elijah Wald, liner notes to Josh White, \textit{Free and Equal Blues} (Smithsonian Folkways SF CD 40081, 1998), 4-5.
Bound in Jail,” and “Trying to Get Home” – and as is the case with much material sacred or secular, the familiar musical and lyrical refrains of the above songs were often all that unified one artist’s interpretation with another’s. White’s version of “True Vine,” for example, bears a certain resemblance to Davis’s musically, notably in the chorus and the prominent use by both guitarists of the leading tone, though Davis, unlike White, played the song with reverse bass. Lyrically, the two versions have little in common and, in fact, certain of White’s couplets appear, instead, in Davis’s rendition of “I Heard the Angels Singing.”

To sum up, Davis did not appear to exert much influence on White, who was reacting to regional and national tastes in his own personalized fashion, and was not nearly as adventurous as Davis in terms of the fretboard or as fecund as Fuller in terms of blues structures. Indeed, White was among the most conservative players to come out of a Piedmont tradition: the majority of his blues played in A or E and set in a twelve-bar, AAa form, and almost all of his gospel in the open D (Vestapol) tuning preferred by many guitar evangelists.

Besides Fuller, the artist who came closest to sounding like Davis was Floyd Council. 137 Born a generation later than Davis, Council (1911-1976) was from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and got his start as well playing string band music. At one point he worked as a truck driver on the farm of J. B. Long, who took Council to New York to record for ARC with Fuller in 1937. 138 It’s entirely possible that Council came to know the music of Davis through Fuller, since Davis didn’t recall knowing Council in a 1966

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137 A trivial aside: Floyd Council along with fellow Piedmont player Pink Anderson gave British rock band Pink Floyd its name.

138 Slaven, liner notes to Blind Boy Fuller Vol. 2.
Nonetheless, Council certainly knew of Davis, and appropriated the elder player’s ideas in a number of tunes. These include the “Mountain Jack”-esque “Working Man Blues” and most remarkably, “Poor and Ain’t Got a Dime,” which bears a startling resemblance to Davis’s “O Lord, Search My Heart” (itself bearing the imprint of Willie Walker as discussed in Chapter 6). Here, however, Council takes Davis’s sixteen-bar gospel song and transforms it into a twelve-bar blues (the intro played as an eleven-and-a-half bar pattern); and while he follows the essential contours of Davis’s phrasing and chord shapes and melody line, he does so with slightly less rigor – he only strums through the passing chord sequence in the cadence, for example (m. 10 in Example 3.30), and accents the neutral third (B-flat) with the first finger (ms. 1, 3, 9) compared to Davis, who plays the same note with his thumb, engaging the open B as well in what becomes a tone cluster (ms. 2, 4, 6 in Example 3.31).

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140 Interestingly, “Poor and Ain’t Got a Dime” by Council (ARC 7-04-78, 1937) shares no content, lyrically or musically, with an obvious predecessor, Blind Lemon Jefferson’s “One Dime Blues” (Paramount 12578, 1927). The line, “poor and ain’t got a dime,” doesn’t even appear in Council’s song, suggesting that the title might have been imposed by the record label in an effort to capitalize on Jefferson’s popularity.
Example 3.31. Dipper Boy (Floyd) Council, “Poor and Ain’t Got a Dime.” CD track time 0:01-0:28. From Blind Boy Fuller Vol. 2 (JSP Records JSP7772, 2006); original recording 1937.

Even Council’s lyrics indicate assimilation of “O Lord, Search My Heart.” Over three verses, Council laments the death of his significant other. He next moans wordlessly through a twelve-bar round, only to return for a final restorative stanza. The use of introspective sentiment here is no less powerful for being a floating verse and it curiously mirrors the message in Davis’s song. Sings Council:

I’m going down to the river, fall on my bended knees;
I’m going down to the river, fall on my bended knees;
I’m gonna ask the good Lord to help me if He please.¹⁴¹

In other words: “Oh, Lord, search my heart.”

Regional and contextual distinctions are not the entire picture. A good blues song or song type traveled fast, often through the aid of the commercial recording industry. Many blues players have cited the influence of records on their sound, none more tellingly than B. B. King, who initially took to the blues thanks to records he heard by Blind Lemon Jefferson and Lonnie Johnson. As he explained in his autobiography Blues All Around Me: “Scholars also like to talk about the Delta bluesmen and how they influenced each other. They break down the blues according to different parts of Mississippi and say each region gave birth to a style. Well, as a Delta boy, I’m here to testify that my two biggest idols – guys I flat-out tried to copy – came a long way from Mississippi. Blind Lemon was from Dallas and Lonnie from Louisiana. I later learned about Delta bluesmen like Robert Johnson and Elmore James and Muddy Waters.”¹⁴²


Davis himself came under the sway of popular hits and national recordings, having told Ernie Hawkins that when living in Durham, he would stop in front of a furniture store to learn the latest songs spinning from the store’s Victrola before heading to his busking spot on the street—this, of course, allowed him to learn not only a variety of material but a variety of keys since much of the band music he would have heard on such records favored flat keys. Yet the more popular the song, arguably, the more regional and personal alteration it would have also received, whether it was the ubiquitous “Hesitation Blues” or a tune with assumed regional claims by Piedmont players, “Mama Let Me Lay It on You.”

Often associated with Davis, “Mama Let Me Lay It on You,” was too far-reaching of a song type to support later claims that he authored it. A number of commercially-recorded variants (all in an eight- or ten-bar AB + refrain form) spanned the blues landscape from New Orleans to Memphis to Chicago, from Texas to the East Coast, making specific origins impossible to pinpoint. As a song type, it first showed up on record in 1930 as “Can I Do It for You?” Parts 1 and 2 by Memphis Minnie and Kansas Joe, who seem to have been modeling the comic duos of black vaudeville à la Butterbeans and Susie through a repartee of courtship-like offers from the man and

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143 Hawkins, interview by author, 8 August 2008.

144 Nonetheless, Davis has been for some time increasingly credited as the song’s writer. Dave Van Ronk’s album, Just Dave Van Ronk (Mercury MG 20908, 1964), lists Davis as the author; Bob Dylan’s performance of the song in 1976 from The Band’s “Last Waltz” farewell at San Francisco’s Winterland credits Davis as writer in later reissues of the concert, as in The Last Waltz (Warner Bros. 11771, 2004); and most recently, the latest reissue of Dylan’s debut (Bob Dylan, Columbia CK 94239, 2005), lists Davis as author with “contributions by E. von Schmidt and D. Van Ronk.”

spurned rejections from the woman that ended in Part 2 with Minnie finally accepting Joe’s offer:

Kansas Joe:
I’d buy you a Sedan Ford,
Buy you a Sedan Ford,
Buy you a Sedan Ford,
If I can do sumpin’ to you,
Here me sayin’, if I can do sumpin’ to you.

Memphis Minnie:
I would take a Sedan Ford,
Yes, I’d take a Sedan Ford.
I don’t want nothin’ in this world you got,
But I would take a Sedan Ford,
Here me sayin’, I’d take a Sedan Ford.\textsuperscript{146}

It was this version, curiously, that survived decades later as a fife and drum performance documented in 1959 by Alan Lomax in north Mississippi – “Chevrolet” by Lonnie and Ed Young – which was either a traditionally-arranged response to the commercial hit or possibly belied a traditional source for the hit.\textsuperscript{147}

The song type next showed up in 1935 in a variant titled called “Don’t Tear My Clothes,”\textsuperscript{148} performed by the State Street Boys, a one-off Chicago session that featured, among others, Big Bill Broonzy, Jazz Gillum, Black Bob, and Carl Martin. Cincinnati


\textsuperscript{147}Lonnie and Ed Young, “Chevrolet,” on Sounds of the South: A Musical Journey from the Georgia Sea Islands to the Mississippi Delta (Atlantic 7 82496-2, 1993). In the boxed set’s liner notes, Lomax suggests possible origins in British balladry for the song, specifically “Paper of Pins.” Paul Garon also addresses this possible ballad link, citing variants of “Paper of Pins” collected in Mississippi by Arthur Palmer Hudson and the related song “The Keys of Heaven” collected by Cecil Sharpe in North Carolina, Virginia, and Kentucky; see Paul and Beth Garon, Woman with Guitar: Memphis Minnie’s Blues (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 309n 6 (180). If we accept possible ballad origins for “Mama Let Me Lay It on You,” then the early diffusion which took place on the ballad side of things likely set the stage for the emergence of the many geographically-diverse blues variants that followed.

\textsuperscript{148}Released on 78 as OKeh 8962 and Vocalion 03002.
bluesman Walter Coleman made the first recording of the song under the title “Mama Let Me Lay It on You” in 1936 in Chicago, two months before Fuller’s debut version, and given the frequency in which the song type showed up in Windy City sessions – including an unissued version by Sheik Johnson and His Washboard Band as “Baby Let Me Lay It On You” – a case could be made for Chicago as the key place of commercial diffusion for the tune. In the grand scheme of things, Fuller’s first version fit between a plethora of other such songs, all recorded within a few months: Coleman’s first version in February 1936; Sheik Johnson in March; Fuller’s first version in April; Georgia White with Les Paul, as “Daddy Let Me Lay It on You,” in May; and Washboard Sam in June. In fact, by the time Fuller made his second version in 1938, variants of the song had made their way into some dozen recordings.

By the 1960s, Davis – who never recorded it in a prewar setting – was the artist arguably most associated with the song, though others such as Lightnin’ Hopkins (as “Baby Don’t You Tear My Clothes”) and Champion Jack Dupree (as “Baby Let Me Lay It on You”) also recorded variants around the same time. Thanks to performances by Dave Van Ronk and Eric von Schmidt – the latter having learned the Fuller version from Geno Foreman – “Mama Let Me Lay It on You” became a coffeehouse standard. It was recorded by Bob Dylan on his 1962 Columbia debut as “Baby Let Me Follow You Down,” and was then appropriated two years later by the Animals for their hit “Baby Let Me Take You Home” (patterned to a large degree, it should be noted, after Hoagy Lands’

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1963 Sam Cooke-inspired version on Atlantic, “Baby Let Me Hold Your Hand”). Even traditional Mississippi musician Babe Stovall did a version learned from Dylan’s record!150 As Schmidt later recounted about the Dylan version, “Gary [Davis] only wrote three-quarters of it. My good buddy Dave Van Ronk had written 12.5% and I wrote the rest!”151 Dylan himself told Cameron Crowe in the 1980s that, “I think it’s a Reverend Gary Davis song.”152

Authorship issues aside, it was hardly coincidence that the song first showed up in Davis’s commercially available repertoire in 1964 – on The Guitar & Banjo of Reverend Gary Davis as the banjo-guitar instrumental “Please Baby” – at which point it had become a hit internationally in folk, soul, and rock circles. Yet it is just as probable that Davis, even if he didn’t necessarily compose the song, would have introduced it, as he did other songs, to his foremost prewar student, Blind Boy Fuller, who recorded it twice in 1936 and 1938. The musical similarities are, indeed, compelling, paralleling as they both do, the first phrase of Memphis Minnie’s and Kansas Joe’s “Can I Do It For You?,” which seems to have been something of a blueprint:

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151von Schmidt with Kruth, “Remembering Reverend Gary Davis,” 73. For Schmidt’s thoughts on the song and what he felt was a legitimate claim by Davis as author, see also Larry Jaffee, “Eric Von Schmidt: Famous for a Song He Didn't Write,” SongTalk 3, no. 2 (1993): 13; reprinted online at the Bob Dylan Roots and Influences website at http://www.bobdylanroots.com/inter03.html#jaffee (last accessed 16 August 2010).

152Cameron Crowe, liner notes to Bob Dylan, Biograph (Columbia C3K65298, 1985), 42.
Example 3.34. Blind Boy Fuller, “Mama Let Me Lay It on You.” Track time 0:01-0:15. From Blind Boy Fuller, 1935-1938 (JSP Records JSP7735, 2004). Original recording ARC 6-08-54, 1936. Played in a G shape on the guitar, the pitch is slightly below B-flat, suggesting Fuller had a capo on the third fret.

After the initial rising phrase, Davis and Fuller take the song in a different direction, one indebted more to Piedmont regionalism through the heightened use of chromaticism – especially in the sequence-like second phrase – and prominent harmonic structures, and strong blues-rag turnarounds. They both played the song, however, with a striking similarity of phrasing and musical content, leaving no doubt that there had been some sort of guitarists’ exchange – and given the amount of ideas older musician Davis imparted on Fuller elsewhere (not to mention Davis’s fondness for the music of Memphis Minnie), we can safely assume that Fuller was on the receiving end of this lesson.

Lyrically, however, Fuller offered more verses than Davis, who pretty much limited his singing to repetitions of the chorus, though he would typically toss in a final stanza filled with metaphors about moving vehicles – the mention of cars, in fact, was the one lyrical idea in addition to the chorus that was common to nearly all performances of the song by its various interpreters:

I tell you what I’d do, I’d buy you a Cadillac car,
And a motorcycle on the side.
I’d do anything in this god almighty world,
Just let me lay it on you, please honey.
Buy you a jet plane,
And a greyhound bus.
I tell you what I’d do – here’s nine hundred dollars –
Let me lay it on you, please let me lay it on you.153

If Davis did no fit entirely the standard issue Piedmont blues style as exemplified by guitarists Willie Walker, Blind Blake, and Blind Boy Fuller, he certainly did not exhibit most of the traits associated with his fellow guitarist evangelists and so-called

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“jack-leg” preachers who operated on the fringes of society not to mention mainstream Christianity, which held little tolerance for those who proselytized without training or an established church.\textsuperscript{154} Between 1926, when Blind Joe Taggart and Rev. Edward W. Clayborn both made their first sides, and the mid-1930s, when such artists were on the wane at least in terms of being a commercial alternative to the growing popularity of gospel quartets, a number of guitar evangelists were recorded. Some were legitimate sacred performers while others were simply street singers or essentially secular artists (e.g., Blind Willie McTell) who had broad repertoires including a few religious numbers. The term itself appears to have been introduced by Clayborn’s record company, Vocalion, which advertised the musical reverend as “The Guitar Evangelist” on his first sides. Only a few of these artists were ever granted more than one session, suggesting that the genre wasn’t a big seller to begin with, and of these only Taggart, Clayborn, and Blind Willie Johnson sold well enough to have had legitimate recording careers that extended over a few years and multiple sessions.\textsuperscript{155} Table 2 below examines 161 tunes by sixteen prewar acts in this style.


\textsuperscript{155}Washington Phillips, who played a dulceola, might nonetheless be considered in this category. Blind Gussie Nesbit had one further session, though with a different label and a gap of nearly five years.
## TABLE 2: COMPARATIVE LIST OF PREWAR GUITAR EVANGELISTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Year(s)</th>
<th># Issued songs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Blind Joe Taggart</td>
<td>1926-1934</td>
<td>31</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th># Sacred songs + # in guitar evangelist (GE) style</th>
<th>Settings of GE songs</th>
<th>Keys/tunings of GE songs</th>
<th>Slide</th>
<th>Vocal span of GE songs</th>
<th>Highest pitch sung + scale relation (GE songs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30/30</td>
<td>a) solo (12); b) duo (16); c) trio (2)</td>
<td>open G(^3) (27)</td>
<td>no (all)</td>
<td>11(^{\text{th}}) (2) 10(^{\text{th}}) (3) 9(^{\text{th}}) (2) octave (17) 7(^{\text{th}}) (2) 6(^{\text{th}}) (2) 5(^{\text{th}}) (2)</td>
<td>h(^{\text{iv}}) M3(^{\text{rd}}) (2) a(^{\text{'}\text{}}) tonic (4) g(^{#\text{}}) tonic (1) g(^{\text{b\text{'}}\text{}}) tonic (7) f(^{\text{b\text{'}}\text{}}) tonic (3) f(^{\text{‘}}\text{\text{}}) tonic (2) 4(^{\text{th}}) (1) M6(^{\text{th}}) (2) e(^{\text{\text{b\text{'}}\text{}}\text{}}) M6(^{\text{th}}) (1) d(^{#\text{}}) 5(^{\text{th}}) (1) d(^{\text{‘}}\text{\text{}}) 5(^{\text{th}}) (2) c(^{#\text{}}) 5(^{\text{th}}) (1) c(^{\text{‘}}\text{\text{}}) M3(^{\text{rd}}) (2)</td>
</tr>
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1Selected artists were chosen a) as representative of a prewar guitar evangelist sound, b) for having recorded a majority or significant portion of sacred repertoire, and c) for not having had a recording career, as far as we know, as a bluesman or predominantly secular musician (à la Charley Patton, who recorded a number of sacred sides). This chart does not count sides where the artist is accompanying someone else, as in Gary Davis’s guitar work behind Blind Boy Fuller and Bull City Red. It also by and large precludes settings such as preacher/congregants, sermons, sanctified bands, and/or larger ensembles such as jazz and jug bands. Perceived elements of a “guitar evangelist” style are of concern here.

2The listed interval accounts from lowest to highest pitch the range of the lead vocal. Harmony vocals are not counted unless, as in the case of duet singers Dennis Crumpton & Robert Summers, the harmony vocal assumes part of the lead.
| 2. Rev. Edward W. Clayborn | 1926-1929 | 30 | 30/30 | solo (30) | open G (30) | yes (all) | 9th (6) octave (9) 7th (6) 6th (3) 5th (5) 4th (1) | g# m7th (2) g’ M6th (1) g’ m7th (1) f# M6th (6) f’ 5th (8) e’ 5th (7) d’ M3rd (2) de M3rd (1) d’ 4th (1) e# M3rd (1) |
|---------------------------|----------|----|-------|---------|------------|----------|-----------------------------------------------|
| 3. A.C. Forehand & Blind Mamie Forehand | 1927 | 4 | 4/4 | duo (4) | C (2) open D (2) | yes (2) | octave (2) 7th (1) 5th (1) | a’ 4th (1) g’ tonic (1) e’ tonic (1) d’ 5th (1) |

3 An open G tuning identifies a certain relationship between the strings of the guitar, specifically from low to high, D-G-D-G-B-D. It does not however always imply an accuracy of pitch. Taggart’s recordings, for example, are all in an open G tuning but vary in pitch depending on the session anywhere from F to A. The same can be said of the other common alternate, or scordatura, tuning used here, open D (D-A-D-F♯-A-D).

I am using the Holmoltz pitch system here. In the first case, F indicates a B-flat on the third line of the treble staff. That said, pitches are approximate; traditional guitarists of this era used relative tuning, such as tuning the guitar strings to fit one’s own voice, and rarely tuned to a pure A440 unless playing in certain ensembles where an instrument’s pitch might be more fixed, as the case would be with harmonica or piano.

This reflects the one song sung by female participant Mamie Forehand.
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<th>TABLE 2, CONT.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>4. Blind Willie Johnson</strong></td>
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</table>

⁶Two unissued sides, possibly secular, by a Blind Texas Marlin are in all likelihood by Johnson; see *Blues & Gospel Records*, 598.

⁷Johnson used standard tuning (if not necessarily standardized pitch) on eight of his recordings — “Let Your Light Shine On Me”; “Sweeter As the Years Roll By”; “Praise God I’m Satisfied”; “Take Your Stand”; “Can’t Nobody Hide from God”; “If It Had Not Been for Jesus”; “Go with Me to the Land”, and “Church, I’m Fully Saved Today”. He also appears to have used what I call a modified standard tuning on ten others in which he performed a riffing/stumming pattern on only the top four strings. The sum total of standard and modified standard tuning accounts for all non-slide performances, though he appears to have arrived at the modified tuning (itself) as a result of starting in open D and adjusting the strings accordingly. Typically, when a guitarist tunes from open D (D-A-D-F#-A-D) to standard (E-A-D-G-B-E, from low to high string), the sixth string gets raised a step, the third a half-step, and the second and first strings each a step. Johnson appears to have found an alternate method of reaching standard from open D by lowering the fourth string a step, lowering the third a half-step, and leaving the second and first strings as is. The result is a standard-type tuning but a step lower than the established pitch (i.e., C-F-A-D or some lower-pitched string relationship instead of the usual D-G-B-E), which is the case in eight of the ten tunes that seemingly use this method. In addition, Johnson didn’t utilize the two lowest strings in this makeshift, tenor guitar-like, tuning, though he did play all six strings, including full chords and runs, on the eight songs where a typical standard tuning was employed. It is also possible that on the modified tuning numbers, Johnson could have used a spectrums – the alternating riff-and-strum effect that he arrives at on these songs can be achieved with either a pick or by alternating the right hand thumb and index finger. Finally, when Johnson tuned from standard or modified standard to open D (the reverse of the above discussion), normal pitch relationships tended to stay in place, as on his second session on 5 December 1928.
| 5. Lonnie McIntosh                        | 1928 | 10 | 10/4\(^8\) | solo (4) | C (3) | G (1) | no (all) | 13\(^{th}\) (1) | 12\(^{th}\) (1) | 7\(^{th}\) (1) | 6\(^{th}\) (1) | a\(^\prime\) |
| 6. Blind Willie Davis                   | 1928-1929 | 6 | 6/6 | solo (6) | modified open D (6)\(^9\) | yes (all) | octave (3) | 7\(^{th}\) (1) | 5\(^{th}\) (1) | 3\(^{rd}\) (1) | a\(^\prime\) tonic (1) | g\(^\#\) tonic (1) | c\(^b\) tonic (1) | 5\(^{th}\) (1) | d\(^\prime\) |
| 7. Blind Benny Paris                    | 1928 | 2 | 2/2 | duo (2) | open G (2) | no (all) | 10\(^{th}\) (1) | 9\(^{th}\) (1) | f\(^\prime\) | m7\(^{th}\) (1) | e\(^\prime\) |
| 8. Rev. I. B. Ware                      | 1928 | 2 | 2/2 | trio (2) | open D (2) | yes (all) | octave (1) | 5\(^{th}\) (1) | E\(^\prime\) tonic (1) | g\(^\#\) | M3\(^{rd}\) (1) |
| 9. Blind Willie Harris\(^10\)          | 1929 | 2 | 2/2 | solo (2) | C (2) | no (all) | 9\(^{th}\) (2) | d\(^\#\) | 2\(^{nd}\) (1) | a\(^\#\) | 6\(^{th}\) (1) |

\(^8\)The six sides McIntosh recorded in December 1928 under “Elders McIntosh and Edwards” are not counted here since they were more in the sanctified band tradition cultivated at the time in places such as Memphis and the Church of God in Christ (indeed, C.O.G.I.C. star Bessie Johnson is the likely candidate for a “Sister Johnson” who participated in those sessions).

\(^9\)The tuning appears to be from low string to high, D-A-D-A-D, where the third string, typically tuned to the third of the chord (F\(^\#\)), doubles the tonic instead. Willie Davis also appears to use a capo on a number of his performances.

\(^10\)It has been suggested that Blind Willie Harris may be Richard “Rabbit” Brown in sacred guise; see Blues & Gospel Records, 362.
<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>10. Blind Roosevelt Graves</th>
<th>1929-1936</th>
<th>20</th>
<th>8/2¹¹</th>
<th>duo (2)</th>
<th>open G (2)</th>
<th>no (all)</th>
<th>5th (1)</th>
<th>6th (1)</th>
<th>g♭ (1)</th>
<th>d♭ M3 (1)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11. Eddie Head and His Family</td>
<td>1930</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4/4</td>
<td>poss. trio/quartet (4)</td>
<td>D (4)</td>
<td>no (all)</td>
<td>9th (1)</td>
<td>octave (3)</td>
<td>b' 6th (2)</td>
<td>a' 5th (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12. Mother McCollum</td>
<td>1930</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6/6</td>
<td>duo (1) trio (5)</td>
<td>a) lead guitar: open D (4); b) rhythm guitar: G (6)</td>
<td>yes (4)</td>
<td>octave (1) 7th (1) 5th (3) 3rd (1)</td>
<td>b' 5th (4) a' M3 (1) g♭ M3 (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13. Blind Gussie Nesbit</td>
<td>1930</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4/4</td>
<td>solo (4)</td>
<td>open D (3) G (1)</td>
<td>yes (3)</td>
<td>octave (4)</td>
<td>c' tonic (1) c' tonic (1) b tonic (1) h 5th (1)</td>
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¹¹ Other than two issued performances, Graves’s sacred (and, for that matter, all secular) sides are in either a small jazz or jug-like combo.

¹² The song at issue here, “Motherless Children,” is one of the more curious performances in all of African American traditional music, in that Nesbit’s rendition is truly polytonal – he sings in the key of E while playing his slide in the key of C!
TABLE 2, CONT.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>14. Josh White</strong></td>
<td>1932-1942</td>
<td>89(^{13})</td>
<td>27/21(^{14})</td>
<td>solo (14) duo (7)</td>
<td>open D (20) C (1)</td>
<td>no (all)(^{15})</td>
<td>12(^{th}) (1) 11(^{th}) (4) 10(^{th}) (3) 9(^{th}) (3) octave (6) M(^{6}) (1) m(^{6}) (2) 5(^{th}) (1)</td>
<td>f(^{'}) m3 (^{\flat}) (1) e(^{'}) m3 (^{\flat}) (1) e(^{'}) tonic (1) eb(^{'}) tonic (3) d(^{'}) m3 (^{\flat}) (1) d(^{'}) tonic (1) db(^{'}) m3 (^{\flat}) (2) c(^{#})(^{'}) tonic (3) b M(^{6}) (1) b tonic (2) h 5(^{th}) (1) a(^{#}) M(^{6}) (1) g m3 (^{d}) (1) f(^{#}) M(^{6}) (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>15. Blind Gary</strong></td>
<td>1935</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12/12</td>
<td>solo (12)</td>
<td>C (9) A (1) G (1) F (1)</td>
<td>no (all)</td>
<td>10(^{th}) (1) 9(^{th}) (2) octave (8) 5(^{th}) (1)</td>
<td>a(^{'}) M(^{6}) (3) M3 (^{d}) (1) g(^{'}) tonic (1) g(^{'}) 5(^{th}) (4) e(^{'}) tonic (1) e(^{'}) 5(^{th}) (1) c(^{'}) tonic (1)</td>
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\(^{13}\) As explained in the blues chart, I have limited my look at White’s prewar repertoire to 1942, after which his music took a more urban and socially invested tone.

\(^{14}\) Most of White’s twenty-seven religious numbers from this period were from 1933-1935 and played in either solo or duo guitar settings, though six have not been counted in the guitar/street evangelist side of the tally due to their decidedly more urban tone and ensemble: two religious numbers played in a guitar/piano duet and four with vocal gospel quartet.

\(^{15}\) White’s only two slide numbers from this period were secular tunes, “John Henry” and “Jim Crow Train.”
| 16. Dennis Crumpton & Robert Summers | 1936 | 2 | 2/2 | duo (2) | open D (2) | yes (all) | 2 octaves\(^{16}\) (1) octave (1) | d\(^{\flat}\) tonic (2) |

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\(^{16}\)In the case of Crumpton and Summers, the melody is split between the two singers, with one beginning a phrase and the other assuming the rest of the melodic content.
As disparate as all the performers were, the above table confirms a number of
tendencies shared by guitar evangelists:

First, with the notable exceptions of Josh White and Roosevelt Graves, there was
little in the way of secular material recorded by the guitar evangelists (one likely number
by Taggart under a pseudonym, a possible secular pair by Johnson, and two from Davis,
who at this juncture in his life was phasing out his secular musical identity for that of a
gospel performer/minister). Interestingly, the same line-in-the-sand conviction can be
made for Piedmont bluesmen, who, with the exceptions of the aforementioned White
(who maintained separate identities on his secular and sacred sides) and to a smaller
extent Fuller and McTell, essentially steered clear of gospel song on record.\footnote{Significantly, both Fuller and McTell were blind. Blind Lemon Jefferson also recorded a
handful of sacred sides as Deacon L. J. Bates.}

Second, like their blues counterpart, most guitar evangelist tunes were played in a
solo setting, specifically 95 (or 59%), though the number of those who recorded only solo
is more telling: 6 of 16 acts, or 37.5%. Perhaps the better statistic, then, is that 10 of 16
acts, or 62.5%, were duos of some sort – makeshift combos, typically husband and wife
or a blind musician with a “lead boy,” who could set up quickly and move on, if need be,
just as quickly. Having a filial and/or musical partner would have been a survival
strategy, after all, given the harsh street conditions ranging from crime to police
harassment faced by musicians who frequently had the added condition of some disability
such as blindness (60% of the chosen pool). Davis had no accompanist on either his
prewar blues or gospel sides (though he played second guitar on several of Fuller’s and
Bull City Red’s secular recordings from the same session dates). This was not always the
case, however, and Davis played at various times with others, notably fellow blind artists
Fuller and Sonny Terry on the streets of Durham, Reverend McKinley Peebles in Harlem, and wife Annie Davis on occasion.

Third, most of the players preferred open tunings on their guitars. The chart sampling of guitar evangelists shows that a predominant 69% of all tunes were played in open tunings, 61 in open G and 51 in open D respectively. Reinforcing the predilection for open tunings, eight of sixteen players, or half, were recorded playing only in an open tuning with an additional three having played primarily in an open tuning for a total of 11, or 68.75% of the guitar evangelist pool. In respect to key and/or tuning choice, the average was 1.625 chord shapes/tunings per player. Of Clayborn’s thirty issued sides, for example, all are in an open G tuning with a probable capo used on the second or third fret to accommodate his voice and possibly give his guitar work more punch. Regardless of tuning type, most guitar evangelists of this period stick to one tuning relationship among the strings for most if not all repertoire. This can be explained on a practical level: retuning took time, a potential distraction for whatever audience a musician might have assembled; and retuning on a frequent basis can break strings, which would have been a real concern for street players lacking either the access or resources to purchase new strings (let alone the difficulty for a blind person to change a string, or the risk of losing a crowd while doing such a task). Davis, by contrast, did not use open tunings save for one song, “Whistlin’ Blues,” (see discussion earlier in this chapter). He did adhere, however, to one tuning – standard – for everything, though he varied his key choices much more than did the average evangelist playing in standard tuning such as Lonnie McIntorsh, who appears to have used a capo on the second fret for material in an open-position C shape.
Fourth, many guitar evangelists used some type of sliding device over the strings. The technique made sense for a street musician, especially when used in tandem with open tunings. Both blind guitarists and those of limited ability could accompany themselves with relative ease via this method. Combined with the harmonic foundation, resonance, and projection provided by an open tuning, a slide could carry a legato melody on the top strings, including call-and-answer patterns essential to the structure of much black religious song. Kate Seabrooks noted this lyricism in the religious songs of her former husband Blind Willie McTell, saying, “One thing about Willie, he could play and sing spirituals. He could give out a hymn on his guitar just like you give it out from your mouth and with his strings. And then he would raise that hymn on that string, just straight pick that hymn.” A slide over open strings could also mask the inferior intonation of poorly built or damaged instruments often common to the street player. And the sound of a slide, especially when played on a steel guitar, possessed added volume and sustain, qualities valued by a street player wanting to be heard. Combined with a strong voice and perhaps a tambourine or harmonica, gospel street performers had all they needed to cut through city noise and grab someone’s attention, as in this description by bluesman Phil Wiggins of Washington, D. C. street evangelist Flora Molton: “She had a voice that would cut through concrete and you couldn’t ignore her. She was really into getting the

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157 Bernard West, interview with Ruth Kate Seabrooks, Wrens, Georgia, 3 February 1979, Atlanta History Center MSS 637 Box 21.

158 Richard Spottswood points out several of these qualities in his liner notes to The Slide Guitar: Bottles, Knives & Steel (Columbia 46218, 1990).
maximum out of her [music]. She had her guitar, she had her tambourine, she really made a lot of sound for one person.”

Blind Willie Johnson was the most famous prewar gospel practitioner of this technique (indeed, the subtleties and virtuosic execution of his slide work remain unparalleled to this day). Yet among those who employed open tunings, Clayborn used a sliding device on all his material, Taggart never used one, and Johnson split the difference using slide on only twelve tunes, or 40% of his documented material. Taken as a group, we find half the guitarists (50%) using the device spread out over 61 songs (37.89%). Again, Davis, save for “Whistlin’ Blues,” never used a slide, choosing to deride in interviews those who did.

Davis’s religious material generally complied with that of other guitar evangelists, whose repertoires were all tailored to individual abilities and preferences, i.e., a shared body of song existed within the genre, but so too did the personalization of sacred sources into a centonical whole that varied from performer to performer, song to song. Davis’s version of the aforementioned “I Am the True Vine,” which Josh White and Eddie Head also recorded, is but one example, as is the biblical saga of “Samson and Delilah” (performed by Davis, Blind Willie Johnson, and many others – see Chapter Four). The ubiquitous spiritual “Motherless Children” also showed up in many repertoires (Davis’s included beginning with his 1954 LP for Stinson), and was recorded first in late 1927 by Blind Willie Johnson, whose commercial success spurred a number of imitators in song and style, from Josh White to Blind Gussie Nesbit, the latter in what was the oddest rendition of the song ever committed to record – a polytonal performance sung in the key

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of E but played with slide in the key of C. The duo of Dennis Crumpton and Robert Summers recorded several songs in common with Davis, notably “Go I’ll Send Thee” (shared as well by Piedmont groups Mitchell’s Christian Singers and the Spartanburg Famous Four) plus the unissued tunes “Working on the Building,” “A Great Change,” “My Time Ain’t Long,” and “Since I Laid My Burden Down.” And Davis staples “I Heard the Angels Singing” and “God’s Gonna Separate the Wheat from the Tares” found earlier performances by Rev. Edward W. Clayborn and Blind Joe Taggart.

Another notable example was “Pure Religion,” which Blind Lemon Jefferson recorded in 1926 as “All I Want is That Pure Religion” and Rev. Clayborn recorded the following year (in likely imitation) as “Then We’ll Need That True Religion.” Spartanburg, South Carolina, gospel stylist Gussie Nesbit also borrowed his 1930 version, “Pure Religion,” stanzas and all, from Jefferson (though his slide and vocal moaning take a note as well from Willie Johnson). Josh White had a go at it in 1933 and Davis didn’t record it until 1957.

Like most versions, Clayborn’s addressed the comfort provided by Christian faith in the face of death, its six stanzas painting ironically contrastive imagery between the pain of death and its glorious welcome through the constant reminder of “hallelu, hallelu” – and here, his characteristically regimented slide guitar worked to great advantage, a musical accompaniment as certain in its metronomic beat as the song’s sense of religious resolve.

Mother, take the pillow from under my head, hallelu, hallelu,

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160 Blind Gussie Nesbit, “Motherless Children” (Decca 7131, 1935). Johnson’s debut 78 (“I Know His Blood Can Make Me Whole”, “Jesus Make Up My Dyin’ Bed,” Columbia 14276-D, 1927) was so well-received, the label pressed more copies than a contemporaneous 78 by best-selling artist Bessie Smith; see Samuel Charters, liner notes to The Complete Blind Willie Johnson (Columbia/Legacy C2K 52835, 1993).
Mother, take the pillow from under my head, hallelu, hallelu,
Mother, take the pillow from under my head, Jesus making up my dyin’ bed –
Then you’ll need that true religion, hallelu.

Hush now mother, don’t you cry, hallelu, hallelu,
Hush now mother, don’t you cry, hallelu, hallelu,
Hush now mother, don’t you cry, don’t you know I’m born to die –
Then you’ll need that true religion, hallelu, hallelu.

Doctor standing round looking sad, hallelu, hallelu,
Doctor standing round looking sad, hallelu, hallelu,
Doctor standing round looking sad, “Hardest case I ever had” –
Then you’ll need that true religion, hallelu, hallelu.

Crossin’ Jordan you need not fear, hallelu, hallelu,
Crossin’ Jordan you need not fear, hallelu, hallelu,
Crossin’ Jordan you need not fear, Jesus is the engineer –
Then you’ll need that true religion, hallelu, hallelu.

Jordan’s river deep and wide, hallelu, hallelu,
Jordan’s river deep and wide, hallelu, hallelu,
Jordan’s river deep and wide, I have a home on the other side –
Then you’ll need that true religion, hallelu, hallelu.

Jordan’s river deep and cold, hallelu,
Jordan’s river deep and cold, hallelu, hallelu,
Jordan’s river deep and cold, I’m so glad He blessed my soul –
Then you’ll need that true religion, hallelu, hallelu.¹⁶¹

Davis, on the other hand, turned the song into a fingerpicked frenzy with lyrics just as emphatic, an assemblage of sinner types (drunkard, gambler, liar) rushed along by hot guitar toward an urgent reckoning of one’s deeds. Divided into eight-bar sections, Davis sang twenty-three statements, sixteen alone of the chorus with the guitar frequently filling a call-and-response role against the vocal. Where Clayborn, Jefferson, et al. sang from the perspective of someone who is saved – the promise of life on the other side – Davis sang from the perspective of those yet to be saved, a warning to the uninitiated. It

¹⁶¹Rev. Edward W. Clayborn, “Then We’ll Need That True Religion” (Vocalion 1121, 1927); lyrics transcribed from Blind Willie Johnson and the Guitar Evangelists (JSP Records JSP 7737, 2004).
was also the most preacherly of any recorded version, Davis interjecting spoken, sermonized commentary throughout.

John say must have that pure religion,
Must have religion and your soul converted,
Must have that pure religion,
Can’t cross here.

John say must have that –
Must have religion and your soul converted
Must have that pure religion,
Can’t cross here.

Where you going, ol’ liar?
Where you goin’, I say?
Going to the river of Jordan.
You can’t cross there.

John say must have that –
(Spoken: Talk to me, then.)
Must have that –

John say must have that –
(Spoken: Talk to me, then.)
Must have that –

(Spoken: Here come the drunkard.)
Where you going ol’ drunkard?
(Spoken: With a bottle in his pocket. Get that bottle out of your hand.)
Don’t, you can’t cross there.

John say must have that – (spoken: What?)
Must have that pure religion.
Can’t cross there.

John say must have that –
Must have religion and your soul converted,
Must have that –
Can’t cross there.

Where you goin’, ol’ gambler?
Where you goin’, I say? (spoken: Where you goin’?)
Throw them cards away. Don’t, you can’t cross there.
John say must have that – (spoken: Oh, yeah.)
Must have that –

John say must have that –
Must have religion and your soul converted,
Must have that pure religion.
Can’t cross here.

Where you goin’, ol’ liar?
(Spoken: Goin’ to tell some lies. Where you goin’?
Stop telling your lies. Don’t, you can’t cross there.)

John say must have – (spoken: What?)
Must have that pure religion.

John say must have that –
Must have that pure religion.
Can’t cross there.

Where you goin’, backslider?
(Spoken: Here you come, slide. Where you goin’?
Stop slidin’. Don’t, you can’t cross there.)

John say must have that –
Must have religion –
Must have that pure religion.
Can’t cross there.

John say must have that – (spoken: Talk! Talk.)
Must have that –

John say must have that –
Must have religion –
Must have that pure religion.

(Spoken: Here come this peace breaker.)
Where you goin’, peace breaker?
(Spoken: Stop your peace breakin’, now.
Don’t, you can’t cross there.)

John say must have that –
Must have religion and your soul converted.
Must have that –

(Spoken: You can shout but you must have that – )
Must have that pure religion.
Where you goin’, ol’ hypocrite?
Where you goin’, I – (Spoken: Always in the Christian way. Stop your hypocritin’. Don’t, you can’t cross there.)

John say must have that – (Spoken: What you talkin’ ’bout?)
Must have that – 162

Where Davis did side with his fellow evangelists was in the high, emphatic, even raw quality of his vocals. Evangelist vocalizing was rough hewn to begin with when stacked against Piedmont blues stylists, who typically sang in a smoother style than either Deep South or Texas blues singers. But what we find in looking at the cross section of guitar evangelists from the chart is that they pushed their vocal range higher and wider than Piedmont bluesmen, and they did this mostly by reaching for either the tonic or fifth scale degree in the upper register unlike bluesmen who were just as likely to reach for the neutral third for maximum emphasis.

Of Table 2’s 161 guitar evangelist performances, 119, or 73.9%, incorporate an octave or greater in the vocal line. Regarding pitch, 10 of the 16 representative artists hit notes above g’, with the highest sung pitch being an h’ (B-flat) by both Blind Joe Taggart (as a neutral third) and Blind Willie Johnson (as a minor seventh). Mostly, the highest pitch sat on either the tonic (60, or 37.27%) or fifth (39, or 24.22%) for a total of 99, or 61.49%. When we factor in the major sixth (25, or 15.53%), which almost always operated as an upper neighbor tone to the fifth, thereby reinforcing the role of the latter note, the total jumps to 124, or 77%. That’s not to say the neutral third or seventh weren’t used, sometime significantly so, as the aforementioned Taggart and Johnson tunes indicate. In fact, the neutral third occupies the third most frequent uppermost pitch in the

guitar evangelists’ tally (28, or 17.39%). But its emphatic appearance was still removed from the more frequent tonic and fifth.

Also worth noting, the strained aspect of street corner evangelism was regularly pushed to the outer vocal limits by South Carolina players Taggart and Davis: in 15 of 30 performances Taggart hit a g' or higher, while in nine of his twelve prewar gospel numbers Davis hit a g' or above, including four at a' (and while fellow South Carolina street singer Bind Gussie Nesbit never got above an e' pitch-wise, his vocal quality was extreme in its own way, an emphatic rasp that managed to out-growl and groan obvious influence Blind Willie Johnson).

Fuller’s blues oeuvre provides a comparative secular sample, especially given that the few gospel tunes he sang conformed to the above evangelist trend. In Fuller’s blues, the tonic was also the most prominent high note (38 of 114 blues songs, or 33%), though the second most prominent scale degree was not the fifth but the neutral third (29, or 25.44% – the fifth, on the other hand, was third at 25, or 21.92% and the minor seventh a surprising 17 or 14.91%). Furthermore, the pitch of highest emphasis most sung by Fuller was a neutral third d' (15 times), suggesting not only that Piedmont blues performances didn’t extend as high in the upper register as gospel, but that an essential quality of such blues, unlike gospel, was an overt emphasis on the neutral third in vocal phrasing. Davis’s two prewar blues, albeit less of a conclusive sample, were nonetheless similar: a neutral third and minor seventh being the highest sung scale degrees, and c' and d' the highest respective pitches even though his gospel material from the same sessions regularly reached a fifth higher to g' and a' – and though we only have little more than 15
prewar sides with which to compare, Davis’s gospel music also displays a wider tessitura than his secular music from the time (an observation consistent in his later music as well).

What this tells us is that street gospel repertoire by guitarists was frequently sung higher and on more stable scale degrees than blues, even when by the same artist. One explanation is that, while some sacred songs or forms are of a shared ancestry (including Anglo-American input and origination), blues uses a more distinctly “black” scale and form. Another explanation would be what certain scale degrees suggest about the music’s message. Blues operates on many levels of ambiguity, not the least being the predominant role of the neutral third, a note of uncertain pitch between the major and minor third in the Western scale that can reflect the uncertainty, vagueness, emotional wavering, and conflict of blues lyrics. Religious music, on the other hand, favors the more grounded pitches of the fifth and tonic, especially when sung in the upper register. This choice then reinforces spiritual catharsis and joy: the certainty of faith mirrored in the musical certainty of the tonic and fifth.

To sum up, guitar evangelists as a group tended to play in duos, using open tunings in a simple chordal approach with or without a slide, coupled with forceful singing. Other than his vocals, however, Davis didn’t fit the mold, perhaps because he had already developed his instrumental technique in the sphere of secular music. But his guitar playing did not conform fully to the Piedmont prewar blues style as well. True, it has many of the same characteristics, especially in rhythmic execution (light, bouncy rhythms, triplets) and heightened harmonic vocabulary, but Davis’s full neck implementation of the fretboard and overall dexterous conception make his playing an extreme example of the genre. There was a certain amount of shared repertoire and
stylistic convention, as well as the noticeable stamp of Blind Blake and Willie Walker, but the influence appears to have extended more in the other direction, with Davis acting as a model for some if not much of what Fuller did, and informing the guitar work of Council. (Again, this is not to say that Davis was better than his peers, just different – no one is going to fault, for example, the slide magnificence of Willie Johnson, the rhythmic exactitude of Clayborn, the charismatic honesty of Eddie Head and family, or the breathtaking clarity of Blake.)

Davis encompassed a singular role, approaching style in a way that was at once largely of his own making and largely a negotiation of the musical divide/mirror that was Piedmont blues and guitar evangelism, a shared cultural terrain, as it were, of itinerant musicians and missionaries operating on the fringes of mainstream society. Just as Davis refused to be limited by his life situation, resulting in a blind man who was fiercely determined and independent, so too he refused to be limited by the parameters of acoustic guitar as it was practiced within African American secular and sacred traditions of his time.

**VARIATION I: CONTEXTUAL**

For a final discussion on style, I’d like to offer a few thoughts on Davis and his use of variation, including, in the case of “Sun Is Going Down,” lyrical variety as an open-ended forum for social commentary.

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Davis applied variation in many forms and on many levels, reacting as every musician does to numerous internal and external factors. As any musician knows, the music changes from night to night, influenced as it can be by the setting (indoors, outdoors, a blues stage versus a gospel one), a venue’s acoustics and sound system, health considerations (sore throats, too much to drink), the expectations of an audience as well as the performer’s own expectations (how familiar, for example, is the crowd with the artist’s repertoire), and the subsequent relationship established between performer and audience (familiar, hostile, ambivalent). All of the above and more can dictate the musical and emotional arc of a concert, from the set list to how long a song gets played. In addition, improvisation is not a matter of pulling ideas out of thin air but of reassembling the familiar in new ways, the command over a life’s experience studying, learning, and playing which then allows spontaneity to flow from musical convention and established discourse.\footnote{For thoughts on innovation, the best book still is the one that established a leading paradigm on the topic, H. G. Barnett, \textit{Innovation: The Basis of Cultural Change} (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1953). For thoughts on improvisation as it applies to jazz, few books have examined the topic with more insight and gravitas than Berliner, \textit{Thinking in Jazz}; see especially 449-484 and 492.}

In Davis’s case, he didn’t just limit himself to melodic invention but also welcomed rhythmic, harmonic, timbral, structural and even contextual variation.\footnote{For some insight into the importance of context, see Albert Murray, “Playing the Blues,” in \textit{Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin’, & Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture}, ed. Gena Dagel Caponi, 96-109 (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999).} Certain songs were more malleable than others and seemed to act as platforms for sheer musical invention, as in his many twelve-bar instrumental blues numbers where constant variation played out within a single performance. His sprightly renditions of “Walking Dog Blues,” for example, could run well past twelve minutes, as in a version he once played for Ernie Hawkins built from more than two-dozen passes on the tune’s twelve-
bar motif, not a single statement entirely like the next. Here Hawkins’s reference to Davis’s “mediations” on a blues theme better describes the process than “variation,” since the twelve-bar form acted in part like unmeasured preludes once did for lutenists, as a frame to establish tonality, warm up the fingers (and mind), and extemporize musical ideas. Still other tunes were clearly more arranged, such as “Soldier’s Drill” and “Samson and Delilah,” while some seem to have been rather static set pieces until they are examined through the lens of such variables as contextual and structural types of variation.

“Twelve Gates to the City” – which Davis recorded at least fourteen times in numerous settings between 1935 and ca. 1968/70 and which was the second-most documented of his sacred songs behind “Samson and Delilah” – is one of the better examples for looking at how he might vary a song’s performance depending on the context, i.e., “situational” variation. Over the course of the song’s life as played by Davis, most of its musical elements remained stable, though he incorporated a few additional musical and lyrical phrases as it matured in his hands. What often changed was the emphasis he gave to aspects of the song depending on the situation in which he found himself.

The song itself (alternately known as “Oh, What a Beautiful City”) is a spiritual with deep connections to the Piedmont, and a number of East Coast artists recorded it, beginning with the Norfolk Jubilee Quartet for Paramount in 1929 and including Reverend J. M. Gates in 1939 for Bluebird, Blind Boy Fuller with Sonny Terry and Oh

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166 Track 4 on a digital copy of Tape 4, side B, from Ernie Hawkins’s private recordings of Davis, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, ca. 1968/70. How much hyperbole was in Davis’s claim that he could play “Candy Man” eight hours straight without repeating himself we’ll never know – see John Milward, liner notes to Reverend Gary Davis, Live at Newport (Vanguard 79588-2, 2001).
Red in 1940 (Vocalion 05465), the People’s Burial Aid Society Choir for the Library of Congress in 1940, the Golden Gate Jubilee Quartet for Thesaurus in 1941, and Terry himself at various times later on (including a 1954 duet with Davis for Stinson).

Improvisation for Davis didn’t always mean coming up with something new in an additive sense but could also be explained by the allowance for areas of spontaneity in an overall prescribed framework (as in the open-ended bugle call sections of his otherwise tightly-arranged “Soldier’s Drill”). Spontaneity was expressed in “Twelve Gates” in several ways: a) changing of the song’s structure – often when playing “Twelve Gates,” he would slightly switch stanzic order, using a slightly different number of verses and choruses, and altering where the guitar break would come in; b) melodic variance through head voice, emphatic rhythmic devices, and vocables; c) the constant refiguring of guitar ideas for riffs, fills, and call-and-answer ideas against the voice – each version contained at least one slightly different expressive turn from the guitar than what he had played elsewhere. Of course, a determining factor in much of the above was context. Different settings – the studio, home, and stage – typically yielded different results.

A sampling of four such performances supports the notion that context contributed to how Davis played a song. The debut recording of “Twelve Gates” was played fastest (3:09; MM quarter note = 130 → 142), likely due in part to the time constraints of the 78 rpm format, but also as a possible way to argue to the label that his sacred material was just as riveting as the blues tunes he had played the first day of the session – indeed, “Twelve Gates” is essentially the same musical setting in the key of A as “I’m Throwing Up My Hands,” and every bit the guitar spectacle. Still, he gets through ten statements – seven choruses and one verse repeated twice with a guitar intro
but no break – snappy and to the point. When John Cohen captured Davis at home in 1953, the mood was considerably more relaxed, with a “Twelve Gates” that clocks in at almost four minutes (3:55; MM quarter note = 90 → 105) despite his only singing nine statements – six choruses and two verses. He added a new verse, however, about contacting a relative in heaven (here, a brother), and the signature call-and-response guitar break of the piece shows up for the first time.

By 1956, Davis delivered perhaps his best overall studio performance of the piece, where all the ingredients were in place plus some, especially in the surprising and pronounced appearance of the raised-fourth scale degree in the guitar break, a blues-inflected gesture that mirrored the recurrent flat-fifth pull-off of the song’s turnaround.
The song’s length (3:23; MM quarter = 108 → 122) is comfortably between the previous two, a pace that allowed expressive details to emerge but still maintained forward momentum. In 1965, Davis, who was then pushing 70, gave a decidedly different “Twelve Gates” for the crowd at the Newport Folk Festival, one that was nothing short of a sung sermonette. At 4:34 (MM quarter = 90 → 94), it was his longest and slowest of the aforementioned versions, yet for a reason that had less to do with his advanced age (he started it just as slow twelve years prior for Cohen) than with Davis the preacher wanting to ensure his words reached the “congregation” he had before him. Sung with a deliberate pace and with the least amount of acceleration of tempo over the course of any performance of the piece, this is a “Twelve Gates” that de-emphasizes guitar wizardry for spiritual exaltation. “I’m playing you ‘Beautiful City,’” he stated with a matter-of-factness born out by the beauty of his performance. This pace also allowed Davis, who had flirted with head voice gestures in previous renditions of the song, to ride a wave of falsetto notes – as mentioned and transcribed above – that were among the best singing he ever did. While “Miss Gibson” did much of the “talking” in studio and home performances on “Twelve Gates,” Davis seized the live setting, here notably, as an opportunity to fulfill the musical ministering he was called to do.

In addition, each of the above-mentioned renditions followed a slightly different structure (where I = guitar intro, C = chorus, V = verse, and B = guitar break). So for the 1935 recording, we have I CC V CCC V CC; in 1953 it was CC V CC B C V C; in 1956 it was CC V C B C V CC; and in 1965 it was I CC V CC V C B C. Not unlike how he approached playing “Maple Leaf Rag,” the ability here to readily switch parts of the song around while retaining its overall structure allowed, I believe, a way for Davis to
approach the song anew each time and to shape a “spontaneous” arrangement that best suited the situation, saving, for example, his guitar break toward the song’s end at Newport for maximum emotional punch, or not using a guitar break at all in 1935 to perhaps meet the label’s time limitations.

**VARIATION II: STRUCTURAL + A TEXTUAL LINGUISTICS CASE STUDY IN “SUN IS GOING DOWN”**

In structural variation, a song’s structure is the aspect most altered from performance to performance, and Davis notably brought a kind of improvisational fluidity to structure in several numbers. “Maple Leaf Rag,” for example, incorporated a modicum of unpredictability derived from how he strung together the rag’s four strains in any given version (see Chapter Five for a detailed discussion). When structural variation was applied to tunes with lyrics, as in the endless lyrical refiguring he gave “Sun Is Going Down,” the technique provided an opportunity for subtle yet charged commentary, Davis juggling stanzas into a veritable prism of possible meaning(s).

In a recent paper on the music of Son House, Luigi Monge applied textual linguistics – the use of both statistical-objective and interpretive-subjective critical thought as they relate to textual meaning – to arrive at conclusions beyond what a straightforward reading of House’s lyrics would have provided. Specifically, in his examination of House’s “Dry Spell Blues,” Monge argued that the lengthy blues narrative, which concerned a drought, was actually an appeal to God by the onetime preacher, a blues prayer that confirmed House’s ability to “preach the blues” as he

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suggested famously in another of his songs. This approach to blues lyrics can also be applied to the music of Davis in order to glean added psychological intimations from his choice of texts and themes. How did, for example, Davis’s early life – strife-ridden as it was by virtue of his having to fend for himself as a street evangelist, blind, black, and often alone in the segregated South – shape the choice of such traditional texts as “Mean Old World”:

This is a mean world you live in until you die.
This is a mean world you live in ’til you die.
Without a father, without a mother,
Without a sister and no brother,
It’s a mean world you live in ’til you die.\(^\text{168}\)

In applying the idea of torment transposed to art, as Monge describes it,\(^\text{169}\) one can glean from Davis’s trial-and-tribulation religious material something rooted equally in a blues experience. Indeed, if Davis were at all a “holy bluesman,” as some maintain, “Sun Is Going Down,” I offer, makes the best case.\(^\text{170}\) Though gospel in feel, structure, and sentiment, the song nonetheless meets the criteria of what David Evans has defined as a “blues core” in folk blues performances, the fixed elements of such a song being threefold: the melody, instrumental accompaniment, and one or more lyric stanzas.\(^\text{171}\)

More to the point, Evans, in discussing composition types within the folk blues,

\(^{168}\)Reverend Gary Davis, “Mean Old World,” on Demons and Angels.

\(^{169}\)Monge, “Preachin’ the Blues,” 229.

\(^{170}\)There is no immediate musical or lyrical relationship between Davis’s “Sun Is Going Down” and other songs of a similar name or nature such as the Lightnin’ Hopkins blues “Sun Goin’ Down,” “Sun Goin’ Down” as sung by Son House, or “The Sun Goes Down” as documented by John W. Work. All, in fact, are different from one another.

mentioned one he had not come across in his fieldwork but likely existed:

“thematic/partly stable,” i.e., a performance containing a blues core compositional technique that was mostly thematic in nature.\textsuperscript{172} Albeit a gospel number on the surface, “Sun Is Going Down” fits that description, something bolstered by its possible dual interpretation as a blues, as discussed below.

Among Davis’s most viscerally animated numbers, especially when he was joined by Sonny Terry on harmonica, “Sun Is Going Down” dealt in dark, urgent tones with death and the need for repentance, a string of ever-revolving sixteen-bar stanzas linked by an overall theme of apocalyptic retribution and the end times. And the following discussion doesn’t preclude other types of variables that were in play when Davis performed the song, from melodic to contextual variation – most musical performances within African American vernacular music, after all, offer any number of methods for musical variation within a single performance. In twelve fully-documented performances between 1954 and 1971, Davis offered anywhere from six to eighteen stanzas, all of a repetitiously emphatic AAAA variety, with only three consistencies in practically all versions: the fixed core elements of the same melody, guitar accompaniment (including all with a guitar intro), and same introductory stanza, “Sun is going down,” – and only in his final 1971 studio performance did he vary from this structural scaffolding by eliminating the title stanza that announced the song in every other performance.

Performances of “Sun Is Going Down” (where s = studio, l = live, h = home, p = private, and g = guitar intro/break; see Appendix 10a for fuller breakdown)\textsuperscript{173}

\textsuperscript{172}Ibid., 248.

\textsuperscript{173}Two performances, one unissued (hence unavailable) and the other an abridged version from the film \textit{Blind Gary Davis}, were not used in the analysis.


Beyond the above core elements, certain consistent sub-themes/scenarios guided the song’s improvised outpourings. From song to song, Davis rarely repeated any one line verbatim, however, preferring to find new ways to say the same thing, from “Death is coming after you” and “Death is knocking on your door” to “Don’t you know you got to die,” “Time for you to take a ride,” and “Well, your time ain’t long.” “Sun is Going Down,” in fact, almost operates as an idea more than a preconceived song, a lyric core that gave Davis enough structural stability to build newly-devised compositions every time, not unlike how he would “riff” out performances on the harmonica with little more than the notion of a fox chase or moving train.

Specifically, there are ten overall sub-themes expressed in various versions of the song (see Appendix 10b). The title line is the identifying stanza. It was almost always placed as the opening idea and was the one line common to every performance save the final documented version. Death is the next most common sub-theme, expressed twenty-one times in nine performances. These vary from direct expressions such as “Death is knocking on your door” and “Don’t you know you got to die” to slightly less overt expressions such as “Say, your time isn’t long,” and “Time for you to take a ride.” Also
worth noting is the frequency per performance of the idea, 1.81 times (stanzas) per song when it is mentioned. Of course, the title line, “Sun is going down,” is a strong metaphor for death as well, and when it is combined with this secondary sub-theme, the tally becomes thirty-five expressions of death (fourteen of “sun” and related “bending low” line + twenty-one of “death”) in twelve performances, or 2.9 mentions per performance. The average length of his performances was 9.6 stanzas per song, which means death comprised essentially one-third of the total lyric imagery (three of every nine stanzas). The third most common image after “sun is going down” is that expressing the need for atonement followed by the related idea of urgency in such atonement, and taken with other sub-themes reinforcing the sinner’s plight and need for salvation; thus, something of a balance is struck in the song between putting the fear of God in the listener, roughly two-thirds of each performance, with one-third offering a way out of the predicament through atonement and prayer.

Breakdown of stanza lines in “Sun Is Going Down” (115 lines from twelve performances):

I: Core line (11 mentions) + secondary core image (3 mentions)
II: Death (21)
III: Need for atonement (14)
IV. Urgency in making up mind (13)
  V. Acceptance of fate (13)
  VI. House on fire (10)
  VII. Fleeing and general sense of displacement (10)
  VIII: Prayer (8)
    IX. Judgment day (6)
    X. God reaching out (6)

That “Sun Is Going Down” functions as a “thematic/partly stable” core, to use Evans’s terminology, is clear from the above dissection. The stability of the core line engages a performance built on the thematic coherence of action and consequence,
retribution and atonement. I further argue that it acts as a “blues” core despite the outer sacred trappings of the song. This idea becomes compelling if we consider than the song is at once sacred and secular, existing in a coded language that threatened fire and brimstone for the unrepentant but also channeled its fury toward a Jim Crow South and the terrors of lynching. If we listen to Davis’s words without the mask of religion, what we get is even more terrifying, a portrait of white-enacted violence and murder rendered on generations of black folk. All of a sudden, lines such as “sun is going down,” “you’d better run somewhere and pray,” “runnin’ won’t do you no good,” and “you’ve got to go right or wrong” take on an entirely different tenor, while more overt lines such as “your house is on fire,” “you can’t live there no more,” “time for you to take a ride,” and “you’ve got to go in the ground” bring such fear and intimidation shockingly to the foreground. Yes, the song concerns God’s impending judgment on sinners, but it also confronts, I argue, the white Southerner’s god-like judgment on his black neighbor.

Davis commented from time to time on the very real threats he experienced growing up in the South, usually framing his feelings with dark humor. To illustrate the severity of racial tensions in Georgia, he offered the following one-liner: “When a colored man went into a tobacco store in Georgia, he had to ask for Mister Prince Albert!” And he began one interview from 1965 with the comment: “In South Carolina they hung colored people when they felt like it; in Georgia they staked them.” He shared more personal accounts with Larry Johnson (see Chapter Two) and Ernie

174 Tilling, ‘Oh, What a Beautiful City’, 43.

175 Noblett, Rye, and Offord, “The Reverend Gary Davis,” Blues Unlimited 25, 10. The reality behind Davis’s assertion was actually crueler, as demonstrated in the carnage meted out in 1899 on one Georgia victim, whose disemboweled body parts were sold as souvenirs; see Leon F. Litwack, Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 280-81.
Hawkins, who recalls an incident Davis experienced while traveling through Texas: “He was on the road and somebody picked him up, I assumed it was a white man. Took him to a place and said, ‘Do you see that hill?’ And the Reverend said, ‘Yes, sir.’ He said, ‘Well, that’s where we hang people like you, do you understand what I’m saying?’ ‘Yes sir.’ And I asked him, ‘Well, what did you do?’ He said, ‘I left Texas.’”

Davis especially opened up to Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold, offering the following stories from his childhood in Laurens County:

I knowed a man one time raised a [black] boy from a lil baby, nussed him at the white woman breast. Rich white man too. One night he happened to be up in a tree watchin some white girls undressin, goin to bed. They had their window up, you know. He jes lookin at everything. They happened to spot him right then. He jumped out of that tree an forgot to git his shoes. They give him five yeahs fo that. An that white man got him out of that. So one day, theah was a man . . . . . . (?) an he saw a white woman long in a buggy, took the white woman out of the buggy, an hugged huh an kissed huh. Thass all. An the woman fainted. That night bout eleven o’clock they took that man out there an made sausage out of him.

Harold: What did they do to him?

They lynched him. Thass what they done. They made sausage out of him, I tell you.177

Davis’s second account parallels one of the most infamous lynchings in Laurens County – a 1913 murder remembered by local black citizens as late as the 1990s – in which a Richard Puckett was accused of assaulting a white woman, taken from the jail by a mob a thousand strong, and hung from the train trestle where downtown Laurens met

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176 Hawkins, interview by author, 8 August 2008. It’s interesting that, in the story Davis tells, he can either see or is assumed to have sight by the Texas man.

177 Harold interview, Reel 5, p. 3-4. Despite their awkward caricature, I have retained the spellings in Harold’s transcription for historical and accuracy reasons.
the entrance to the black community.\textsuperscript{178} Davis was a teenager at the time, still living in South Carolina, and that event, like the many others that made lynching a dreadful part of life for African Americans in the South, would have left a lasting imprint. He was born at a time, after all, when lynchings were at their peak in America, with sixty-seven documented in South Carolina between 1889 and 1900.\textsuperscript{179} Notorious even within that milieu was the state’s western Piedmont area, considered the “bloodiest lynching region in South Carolina.”\textsuperscript{180} Between 1880 and 1940, there were eight publicized lynchings of African Americans in Laurens County alone.\textsuperscript{181} Davis also came of age when lynchings shifted to public ritual, so-called “spectacle lynchings” that also involved sadistic acts of mutilation and torture.\textsuperscript{182}

The attitude among regional whites toward such violence was expressed in the Abbeville Press and Banner from 1885, which noted that two white men in Laurens were acquitted “as a matter of course” for killing a Negro by “sending the bullets through the right place – the back.”\textsuperscript{183} In part, such heinous aggression was spurred on by (failed) labor organizing efforts of black farmers in the 1880s which, in turn, led to rumors that such farmers in Laurens, Pickens, Spartanburg and Greenville counties would obtain their rights by murdering whites, thus giving paramilitary “whitecaps” the only excuse they


\textsuperscript{179} George Brown Tindall, South Carolina Negroes 1877-1900 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1952), 239.

\textsuperscript{180} Terence Robert Finnegan, “At the Hands of Parties Unknown”: Lynching in Mississippi and South Carolina, 1881-1940 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1993), 66.

\textsuperscript{181} Baker, “Under the Rope,” 320.

\textsuperscript{182} Litwack, Trouble in Mind, 285.

\textsuperscript{183} Quoted in Tindall, South Carolina Negroes, 246.
needed to enforce vigilante-style “preemptive strikes” in order to provoke fear, intimidation, and social control.\textsuperscript{184} The murder of successful Abbeville farmer Anthony Crawford in 1916 confirmed the above, his wealth and status cited as the leading factor in his death. According to one state newspaper, “Crawford was worth around $20,000 and that’s more than most white farmers are worth down here. Property ownership always makes the Negro more assertive, more independent, and the cracker can’t stand it.”\textsuperscript{185} Publicly-air\-ed grievances, however, tended to play on white Southerners’ fears of black sexuality, presented usually through the act of rape, as in the oft-repeated speech by South Carolina governor/senator “Pitchfork” Ben Tillman that he would rather see one of his daughters mauled by a tiger or bear than “crawl to me and tell me the horrid story that she had been robbed of the jewel of her womanhood by a black fiend.”\textsuperscript{186} Rape and/or murder then became the de facto charge for lynching someone, though lesser offenses such as quarrelling, burglary, larceny, horse stealing, contractual violation, and prejudice were also sometimes reason enough to kill a black Southerner.\textsuperscript{187}

The level of apprehension and worry wrought by the threat of lynching upon a blind black man must have been unduly high, and it’s no wonder then that Davis even justified his blindness through the lens of the Jim Crow era, noting that sometimes it was advantageous for a black man in the South if he wasn’t able to see.


\textsuperscript{185}Litwack, \textit{Trouble in Mind}, 310.

\textsuperscript{186}Ibid., 302-03.

\textsuperscript{187}Tindall, \textit{South Carolina Negroes}, 245.
Then too, Man should not want everything his eyes see. An you have read the papers a many times where many people have been strung up on limbs in the low countries and lynched. Jes by lookin. Sometimes some men never done nothin but jes look. See? I often think of that. Well, a body’s eyes were made to look right enough, but sometimes it pays a man to keep his eyes closed. That’s what the Scripture says, “If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out.” Sometimes you see too much. Sometimes you see things you have to tell again about what you seen; an if you haven’t see it, you wouldn’t have to tell nothing bout it.\textsuperscript{188}

One of the most harrowing anecdotes Davis ever offered was captured in the 1970 Lionel Rogosin film \textit{Black Roots} where, in front of a group of African Americans that included guitarist Larry Johnson and activist Flo Kennedy, Davis recounted a lynching and its consequences. Davis claimed in another interview that the incident happened in 1912.\textsuperscript{189} Yet even if his telling is largely anecdotal, it is beside the point\textsuperscript{190} – Davis was reaching for a larger truth here, one that only sinks in with the delivery of its cruel punch line, a wry comment wrapped in blues humor on the culture of violence that not only defined America during the Jim Crow era but continued to mark (mar?) the American identity during the Vietnam War. Years before Vietnam veteran Gustav Hasford published \textit{The Short-Timers}, which Stanley Kubrick then adapted for his film \textit{Full Metal Jacket}, Davis reached a similar conclusion: Killers make good soldiers.

\textsuperscript{188}Harold interview, Reel 1, Side 1, p. 10-11.

\textsuperscript{189}Reverend Gary Davis, interview by Larry Johnson and Lionel Rogosin, Jamaica, Queens, New York, winter 1971-1972; 29:12 into track 1 of a digitized copy from Joan Fenton Collection, FT-1339, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

\textsuperscript{190}During the height of lynchings from the 1880s to the 1920s, the murdering of women, while not unheard of, was rare, accounting for two percent of total lynchings, according to Trudier Harris, \textit{Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals} (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1984), 18, or a slightly higher three-and-a-half percent, according to Finnegans. \textit{“At the Hands of Parties Unknown”}, 226-234. Given that the lynching of black women was a generally disdained activity even among racist white Southerners, and that no account like the one Davis described turns up in documented South Carolina lynchings, his story is possibly a composite scenario or to some degree apocryphal, which the anecdote’s cleverly-considered ending seems to reinforce.
Gary Davis: Well, this here woman had been with these white people ever since she was a teenage girl. In fact, she was raised up in the white folks’s house. And she was so well-loved until – her mother didn’t have to do much for her, you know, the white people would look out for her affair, or her welfare, you understand?

Larry Johnson: Um hmm.

Davis: And, uh, this girl married while living with these white people. She married the man on these white people’s place. Fell in love with him. So after dinner they decided to let the children take a walk out down to the pasture to get a good breeze, you know.

Johnson: Um hmm.

Davis: While down there these children get with other children, and they got to fighting. This woman tried to chastise these children ‘cause she had been there long enough she didn’t think that it would do no harm – which she did try to chastise them. And the one little girl got hard-headed and wouldn’t, didn’t want to hear. She first pushed her. This woman takes it out of her hand and smacks her, you understand?

Johnson: Uh hmm.

Davis: Comin’ on back to the house, this girl come home cryin’ and told her mother about it. The mother told her father. Then, you know, it must have been a pretty good ways up in the day. He goes out and gets him a crowd. Takes out, and riddled her body with bullets.

Johnson: Pumped her full of bullets.

Davis: And so this man was working down on the lower plantation where this man had him working at. He didn’t come home until about a half an hour of sun or something like that, might be a hour sun. This man was named John.

Flo Kennedy: That’s her husband.

Davis: Yeah. He didn’t ask about his wife. He just figured she was visiting around some of her neighbors. And he kept through eating to go to work to cut the cow down. Go down in the woods and find not a man but mens down in the woods to cut the cow down.¹⁹¹

Johnson: Um hmm.

Davis: It hurt him so bad he couldn’t cry, you understand, he wouldn’t cry. Only way he know his wife by her face.

Johnson: In other words, when he got down there looking for a cow, he found his wife hanging.

Davis: He found his wife down there hanging up in a tree,

Johnson: Yeah.

Davis: Said, “Y’all please sir, let me go back home and get a sheet to put her in.” The one said, “No, don’t let him go back, don’t let him go back.” The other said, “Well, let him go back and get a sheet, let him go back and get a sheet.” If he done any cryin’ he must have done some while he was goin’ home, goin’ to get where he had to go get and come back.

Johnson: Um hmm.

Davis: Now he didn’t have on him a shotgun, but he had him a Spanish rifle.

Johnson: Um hmm.

Davis: You understand?

Johnson: Um hmm.

Davis: And that rifle was so good, it didn’t have to do anything but just pull the trigger, and it done all the operatin’.

Johnson: Uh huh.

Davis: He wrapped this Spanish rifle up in the sheet.

Kennedy: Beautiful.

Johnson: Uh huh.

Davis: Come back down to the woods with his Spanish rifle. ’Fore he got in the woods good he started to pointing, and everywhere he pointed that gun, you understand, there’s a man fell.

Johnson: A man fell.

Kennedy: Taking care of business.

Johnson: Yeah. [laughs]
Davis: He come up on top of the hill and saw a man sitting down in, on his porch cross-legged reading the newspaper. He threwed him out of the chair. Yang! He kept on runnin’.

Johnson: Killed him, man.

Davis: Got down there a little piece further, then a rooster flew up in front of him. He said, “Well, I don’t think he can do me no harm, but I believe I’ll cut you down.” Hang!

Johnson: [laughs] Shot him.

Davis: Killed him.

Johnson: Killed the rooster.

Davis: Got down a little piece further, there was a calf comin’ across the road. He kissed him. Wham! Kept on kissin’. When a dog run out the road where he was, you understand, he kissed him. Wow! Shot him.

Johnson: Killed a dog!

Davis: Went on down the road, and he found a little wo-, woman sittin’ on the porch rockin’ her baby and kissin’ her baby. I don’t know whether she ever got through kissin’ that baby to know that he lifted, lifted her out of the chair, killed her baby and all.

Johnson: [laughs] Um.

Davis: And never stopped running. And somehow or another he was lucky enough to get to the United States Army.

Kennedy: No, he didn’t.

Davis: And they found out where he was and wanted to send for him. The government said, “Well, you all didn’t get him while he was down there, it’s too late.”

Johnson: Um hmm. Um hmm.

Davis: “And we need such men like this here here.”

Johnson: Um hmm.

Kennedy: Here, here.
Davis: Yeah. [Davis then begins to play “Death Don’t Have No Mercy.”]  

If we are to believe that “memories of lynching act as covert evidence in private discourse of wrongs that cannot be corrected in public discourse,” as Bruce E. Baker maintains in his examination of lynchings in Laurens County, then the larger moral truth of the above story supersedes any authentication of details. Given that public discourse was typically shaped at the time by forums mostly under the control of a white power base, violent acts against African Americans required their recall and preservation through the ritual of stories and song. As we have seen in the above Abbeville Press and Banner citation, mainstream media were not always the most credible witnesses to history, and so the marking of time, place, and people fell on the shoulders of oral culture, often the only option in sustaining the full, pained extent of one’s history.

With that in mind, we can return to “Sun Is Going Down,” where the imbedded message was as much topical as it was spiritual, and one gets the feeling that when Davis was able to “share” the song with fellow black performers, the song’s veiled metaphors diverged to an extent between listener and performer. Davis especially enjoyed performing the song with fellow blind musician Sonny Terry, who was of a similar generation and background and with whom he had played on and off since their time together in Durham in the late 1930s. One energized duet in particular from a 1964 European concert date has little overt religious design – and the label’s mistakenly-given

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194 Ibid., 336.
title, “Sonny Go Down,” is arguably apropos given the private conversation Davis and Terry seem to engage in. Here, the seven stanzas as presented by Davis are removed of the cloak of spirituality through a reorganization of the song’s imagery – a burning house, being driven from one’s home, having to flee, having to reconcile one’s impending death – which tells another story: the evidence and aftermath of black-directed violence.

1. Well, the sun is going down.
2. And it’s bending mighty low.
3. You’d better go somewhere and pray.
4. Sonny, you know you can’t stay here.
5. Your time is going out.
6. You might as well make it up in your mind.
7. Sonny, your house is on fire.\footnote{“Sonny Go Down” (sic) found on \textit{Blues Jams} (Groove Jams, GJ97006, 1998) and Blind Gary Davis and Rosetta Tharpe, \textit{Jazz} (LRC Ltd. n.n., 2008).}

Granted, there is no direct reference to lynching in the above, nor would it have been needed in order to make the point. Davis’s only overt comment on the song was as a brief introduction in concert: “This here talkin’ ’bout the sun of our life, not the meridian sun that shines by day.”\footnote{Reverend Gary Davis, “Sun Is Going Down,” \textit{Demons & Angels}.} But the power of black song is often in its allusive language.

In his landmark book \textit{Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition}, which makes just as compelling a case for the coded language of white on black violence in the blues as scholar Lawrence Levine once made for the intimations of freedom in slavery-era spirituals, author Adam Gussow finds lynching to be an underlying, albeit veiled, theme in a number of prewar blues, notably Bessie Smith’s “Blue Spirit Blues” and Little Brother Montgomery’s “The First Time I Met You,” while a more observable example came via an altered version of “Hesitation Blues” that Texas
jazz pianist Sammy Price recalled hearing as a young man, one which referenced a particularly infamous lynching from that state. Bluesmen who shared their thoughts and experiences on lynching in later years are many and extend from Davis to Josh White, Big Joe Duskin, and others. Yet, as Gussow points out, blues artists who both witnessed and directly sang about such behavior were rare, “Strange Fruit” interpreter Josh White having been among the very few. Unfortunately, the lack of overt references to lynching in blues lyrics has usually rendered it a “nonissue” in discussions on the topic, yet blues has derived part of its power from the ability to state things with allusion, to confront, as Leon Litwack states, “betrayed expectations and an accumulation of frustrations, bitterness, and troubles” all within enshrouded subtexts of commentary.

From spirituals to hip-hop, African American music historically has been defined in part by its use of indirect speech and the veiled turn of phrase, and if we consider that, for generations of black performers, the concert stage, not to mention safe relocation to the North and a place such as Harlem, became spaces for freedom, it’s no great leap to think that Davis and Terry would have used “Sun Is Going Down” – a song for which they showed remarkable musical affinity – as a moment of mutual recognition and comment on their not-too distant past – they had played together, after all, on the streets of Durham in the 1930s along with Blind Boy Fuller, and had established a relationship

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198 Ibid., 49-50.

199 Ibid., 19.

200 Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, 455.
in part out of the necessity blind musicians had in sticking together.\textsuperscript{201} Other performances with Terry were only slightly less intense and slightly more spiritualized, the 1954 version ending with “Tears won’t let nobody stay,” and another reading from 1964 capped by “Don’t you know you got to die.” This was no song about redemption but about resignation to one’s fate, which was, indeed, one of the psychological outcomes experienced by Southern black men in the face of the systemic tactics of lynching.\textsuperscript{202} And the observation by Gussow about Bessie Smith’s “Blue Spirit Blues” – that it used “the canny redeployment of familiar religious imagery as a way of venting a social anxiety”\textsuperscript{203} – equally applies here. When we factor in the assertion that anxiety is a central theme in the blues alongside relationships and travel,\textsuperscript{204} the underlying emotions and implications in “Sun Is Going Down” resonate beyond the religious to become suffering writ large, the wails of a people distilled into one song with contrastive verdicts: Man’s beastly actions against his fellow Man, and, ultimately, God’s wrath on those who would behave in such an abhorrent way. “My God is coming after you,” Davis would also warn in this song, and either way you interpret it, the fear he induced was palpable.

\textsuperscript{201} Bruce Bastin, \textit{Crying for the Carolines} (London: Studio Vista, 1971), 39-40. Terry, of course, would record with Fuller beginning in 1937, and after the guitarist’s death, he hooked up with Brownie McGhee, a.k.a. “Blind Boy Fuller 2.”

\textsuperscript{202} Litwack, \textit{Trouble in Mind}, 422.

\textsuperscript{203} Gussow, \textit{Seems Like Murder Here}, 31.

\textsuperscript{204} See David Evans, “Formulaic Composition in the Blues: A View from the Field,” \textit{Journal of American Folklore} 120, no. 478 (Fall 2007): 496.
CHAPTER IV

“SURE FOUNDATION”: SACRED MUSIC

INTRODUCTION: SACRED AND SECULAR

This study of Davis’s known repertoire entails 223 documented songs and 846 sound and video performances. While it is not the complete picture of all Davis knew and played, it is a good enough baseline to draw many conclusions about what Davis played, how he played it, and in some cases why he chose to play what he did. Chapter Three detailed much of the how and why. Chapters Four through Seven – sacred, non-blues secular, blues, and non-guitar music respectively – look more closely at the full extent of his repertory, what it was, how it breaks down into various sacred and secular sub-groups, possible sources, and Davis’s personalization of the material. The sum group of songs Davis knew also positions him as a major “curator” of traditional African American song second only to Lead Belly.

Any study of a repertoire that crossed traditional and popular boundaries the way Davis’s did is going to be fraught with potential problems and issues. These include how that repertoire was arrived at, how it is grouped for study, how accurately and completely such a list reflects the full range of an artist, and perhaps a more fundamental question of what constitutes, or should constitute, a repertoire. Though many of the following observations are made through the benefit of recordings, it does not indicate fixed data or even fixed compositions in some cases but more ably demonstrate tendencies in Davis’s music.
A definitive list of Davis’s songs can never be fully assembled; this is because Davis, like many prolific performers, never recorded all he knew – including songs he taught to students as well as New York street partner Reverend McKinley Peebles – forgot some of what he used to know, and was selective with whom he shared much of the rest (especially blues and secular song). Davis couldn’t recall, for example, how to play his 1935 recording, “The Angel’s Message to Me,” when asked decades later, nor could he remember by the 1970s how to play “Seven Sisters,” which had been recorded by him in the 1950s. And, as the following pages illustrate, much of his secular repertoire is still unknown to a larger fan base since it was shared in private.

The song list I have compiled includes everything he was known to have recorded, as well as songs we know he taught students but never recorded. This list is massive (see Appendix 4), with the majority of tunes documented only once in his career, either in a studio, live, or, more often, in a private setting. Some of these songs better qualify as one-off performances, such as some of the improvisatory blues and camp meeting structural patterns he played that were the result of Davis reacting spontaneously to a given situation or feeling. The question then begs itself, should such performances be considered less a reflection of set repertory than of open-ended musical impulses?

Judging a performer’s knowledge of song based on recorded performances can create something of a false impression, after all, one based on the idea of music as a “fixed”

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entity. Like many traditional musicians (and jazz players, for that matter), Davis didn’t offer set pieces so much as performances that juggled to varying degrees fixed and fluid ideas. The variety of lyrical and musical ideas he could generate in just one number such as “Hesitation Blues” even prompts the ideological argument that each performance be considered its own “song.” Without taking the debate that far, we can concede, in the words of Roger Abrahams, that the key to appreciating black song is looking at music less as a form than as a process, less as text than as lyrical performance, and less as units of repetition than as moments of improvisation.\(^3\) Davis intimated as much when he opened once in concert with an instrumental spiritual whose title he couldn’t recall. Commenting to the audience, he said, “You can be on a road, you know, and you may not know the name of the road, but you know where you are.”\(^4\) In that light then, we might appreciate Davis less as a song collector than as constant creator, spinning variation upon variation of all he knew into a life story limned with musical notes.

Tempered by that thought, we can return to the observation that Davis knew a lot of songs. Some were the result of students prompting him to remember old material, or Davis trying to recall past tunes, and as such have a half-baked quality that found Davis searching for as much as finding notes. Still others such as “Samson and Delilah” were more composed with strong, stable elements in the arrangement regardless of when and where it was played. Finally, seventeen performances in which Davis was second guitarist or accompanist only behind another singer have not been counted; these include seven possible songs played with Blind Boy Fuller, four with Bull City Red, two backing


Reverend McKinley Peebles, and four with Suzie Dews as vocalist. On the other hand, performances where Davis is in a true duet or contributed a vocal without necessarily playing an instrument (as in a church song or singing a cappella) have been counted.

Davis learned music from many contexts and sources, oral and recorded, traditional and popular, in a layered process common among traditional musicians of the rural South. Repertoire was cultivated regionally, learned from family, musical neighbors, and local institutions such as one’s church; from the carnivals, circuses, medicine shows, vaudeville troupes, and various entertainment attractions that passed through a town; and finally from commercial 78 rpm recordings and, beginning in the 1920s, radio. In one interview alone, Davis mentioned the influence of traveling carnivals (“Candy Man” and “Cocaine”), fellow street singers (“Bad Company”), preachers (“Get Right Church”), gospel quartets (“Little Bitty Baby”), and his religious grandmother (“Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning,” “Blow Gabriel,” and “Children of Zion”).

Like many blind musicians, Davis enjoyed the radio and recordings, and he assembled part of his vast song bag from listening to both. During his days in Durham, he regularly passed by a furniture store that played 78s and would stop long enough to learn the music (honoring his ear and improvisatory skills in the process). He then continued to

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5 The influence of popular sources on traditional musicians still hasn’t received the full credit it deserves in the development of regional and personal style. For example, though B. B. King learned some guitar chords from a relative who was a reverend, King’s biggest influence as a fledgling blues guitarist was the recordings he heard on his Aunt’s Mima’s Victrola of Lonnie Johnson and Blind Lemon Jefferson. As King wrote, “Well, as a Delta boy, I’m here to testify that my two biggest idols – guys I flat out tried to copy – came a long way from Mississippi”; see B.B. King with David Ritz, Blues All Around Me: The Autobiography of B.B. King (New York: Avon, 1996), 22-24.

his busking spot, ready to satisfy the requests of passersby with the latest hits of the day.7 Such a scenario certainly explains many of the popular tunes from the 1920s he knew by singers such as Gene Austin and Al Jolson, as well as the often loose arrangements he gave such songs, where a single melody or hook might be all he retained from the original.

The following repertory study then gives us extra insight into the creative processes of Davis, something I refer to as “generative appropriation” – “appropriation” in the sense that most of Davis’s songs and/or performances contained an element of pre-existing material, which could be traditional and/or popular in origin, and “generative” in how the appropriated material is not just reiterated or re-arranged but is fundamentally altered into a new performance, if not a new composition, where the pre-existing, appropriated cells serve to generate often highly spontaneous, personalized creations. Therefore, even when a popular song is being quoted, the process is still essentially “folk” in its rhetorical, adaptive, and generative principles. Generative appropriation, then, unites Davis’s vast, varied repertoire into an underlying philosophy that treated all song as elementary to the folk process he applied, not unlike how a jazz player might use quotation to open up areas for improvisation and/or musical commentary but also to legitimize the new musical experience by referencing it against the continuum of black song. As the subsequent pages will show, Davis usually borrowed enough of a known tune or lyrical idea, sometimes no more than a measure or two, upon which he then assembled his own finished product. Davis was not alone in this approach, and viewing other pre-war folk-blues performers in a similar light might help explain how such

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performers from Blind Willie McTell and Blind Boy Fuller to John Jackson and B. B. King could learn from records and yet remain, fundamentally, traditional blues musicians. How a song came to be acquired was not the point for traditional African American artists and their audiences (it still isn’t – think of sampling in rap music). Whether oral transmission came from family or the family Victrola, the point was that the artist personalized the found material, secular and sacred alike, into something that provided both familiar connections and the thrill of creation: the pre-conceived song or song idea as impetus for a shared experience through performance. This also explains why two bluesmen can play the same song and yet both claim, accurately I think, that they “wrote” it.

One issue at hand is the division of songs into secular and sacred categories, and there is argument for the opposite, i.e., that all black song is a holistic expression if not a spiritual enterprise, that the same factors which unify African music and its many diasporic branches – shared qualities of sound, function, movement, and delivery – make black sacred and secular traditions more alike than different and render their ritualized venues, from the juke to the church, sacred spaces one and all. While I accept to a degree this view when discussing Davis’s music (elaborated elsewhere), he himself made

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the distinction between secular tunes and what he called “Christian songs,” as did his wife, who would conveniently remove herself from the room when he played non-religious material. Still, one can also hear how the joy of salvation extended to the joy of music, period, for Davis, even in his justification for playing blues, of which he said, “I ain’t gone to hell yet!” Practically speaking, most songs offer obvious classification simply by looking at the words – “She Wouldn’t Say Quit,” for example, would never be labeled sacred song. Some are less clear, however, such as “Bad Company Brought Me Here” and “Lost Boy in the Wilderness.” The former, about a man awaiting execution, has strong blues and bad man ballad connotations, though its intention – moralizing about the actions of this man in order to elicit a change of heart in sinners – is clearly evangelical and thus grouped in the sacred category. The latter, on the other hand, might seem religious given the title, but musically it is of a body of song aligned with rural entertainment and is thus grouped in the secular category.

Another issue is the titling of songs. As explained elsewhere, a number of Davis’s blues performances presented a labeling dilemma that I was able to resolve only after many careful listens. Also, there are chronological inconsistencies in the music Stefan Grossman recorded by Davis in the 1960s. Dates can be conflicting, titles get altered from album to album, and material can be so spread out and recycled for various releases that it can be difficult settling on accurate performances let alone an accurate timeline.11 I

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11For example, performances by Davis of “Tired, My Soul Needs Restin’,” “Georgia Camp Meeting,” and “You’re Goin’ Quit Me Baby,” have been issued several times by Grossman. On the 1974 album, Let Us Get Together, they are identified as having been recorded in either 1963 or 1968, while on
have taken considerable care in reassembling this aspect of Davis’s recorded history (see my Appendix 2 sessionography), correcting previous assumptions and misinformation and eliminating overlap where the same performance of a song gets listed more than once, which has been the case in past Davis discographies.

With all that in mind, Davis’s documented repertoire can be split into a sacred/secular divide surprising for the amount of non-religious song it contains (see Appendix 4). Specifically, I have identified 223 total songs – 121, or 54.26%, sacred versus 102, or 45.74%, secular. This 54/46 split flies in the face of common wisdom, which would have one believe that Davis abandoned his secular repertory after becoming a minister. If anything, he reinserted his knowledge and expression of secular song once he became a draw on the folk concert circuit, with more than 70% of his known non-religious song appearing on tape for the first time in the 1960s.

Yet a blanket summation of his repertory is but one way to appreciate Davis’s diverse song bag. Another would be to distill that list down to a working repertoire, that is, the core group of songs he most relied on whenever he performed and hence an arguably more accurate picture of Davis the day-to-day musician. That’s because, when looking at the totality of song Davis knew, a false impression can be reached based on things he played once, played in private, or made up on the spot. In fact, an incredible 53.8% of Davis’s repertoire was documented but once (59 of the sacred and 61 of the secular songs), the difference being context – 24, or 40.67%, of these singular sacred performances were shared in public, either in concert or church, while only 8, or only 7.8%, of similar secular numbers were shared in public. Tellingly, of 102 documented

the 2001 boxed set *Demons & Angels*, the same performances are identified as having been recorded between 1964 and 1966!
secular songs, 70, or nearly 70%, were only ever recorded in non-live settings (the studio, the home, et al.), indicating that Davis reserved most of that side of his repertoire for private consumption.

Keep in mind that the rankings below provide but a snapshot of Davis the folk festival performer and are not necessarily suggestive of the working repertoire(s) he maintained all his years on the street. (Fortunately, one song gives us that glimpse, the instrumental blues rag “Twelve Sticks,” which is the only example we have of Davis pre-fame playing on the street and was a part of his core repertoire the rest of his professional life.) What the rankings show, however, is that Davis performed through the last decades of his life an almost even split between religious and non-religious song. If we try to distill that list down to a working repertoire, we might look at only those songs we know he recorded in abundance. The demarcation for stable repertoire – songs that Davis played but also songs most familiar to fans – starts at around six performances, so when we list only songs that have been recorded six times or more, the following sacred and secular breakdowns emerge. Simply, these are the songs Davis fell back on time and again:

Sacred (14)
“Let Us Get Together” (6)
“O Lord, Search My Heart” (6)
“There’s Destruction in This Land” (6)
“Crucifixion” (7)
“Death Don’t Have No Mercy” (7)
“I Heard the Angels Singing” (7)
“Children of Zion” (8)
“Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning” (8)
“Soon My Work Will All Be Done” (9)
“Oh, Glory, How Happy I Am” (10)
“You Got to Move” (12)
“Sun Is Going Down” (14)
“Twelve Gates to the City” (14)
“Samson and Delilah” (24)

Secular (15)
“Ice Pick Blues” (a.k.a., “Cross and Evil Woman Blues,” 6)
“Nobody Cares for Me” (6)
“Lost John” (7)
“Soldier’s Drill” (7)
“Walkin’ Dog Blues” (8)
“Hesitation Blues” (9)
“Sally, Where’d You Get Your Liquor From” (9)
“Cocaine Blues” (10)
“Talk on the Corner” (10)
“Maple Leaf Rag” (15)
“Twelve Sticks” (15)
“Mountain Jack” (a.k.a., “I’m Throwing Up My Hands,” 16)
“Candy Man” (20)
“Cincinnati Flow Rag” (21)
“Buck Rag” (22)

The most frequently played songs were “Samson and Delilah” and “Buck Rag,” which is no great surprise. What is a surprise is the overall even split between secular and sacred song, some 14 sacred and 15 secular songs that he typically relied on when he played. Even this isn’t the whole picture, however, since context played an important part. He reserved certain songs for private consumption such as “Nobody Cares for Me” and “Ice Pick Blues,” for example, but some religious numbers were included as well, notably the lengthy “Crucifixion.” If we then refine the list further to those songs most frequently played in concert (or in the case of some sacred material, in church) a truer core repertoire reveals itself. This is because studio recordings and tapes made for private lessons tend to emphasize new and/or unfamiliar songs either for the sake of record sales or for teaching. Indeed, this argument is born out in the number of singular performances Davis gave, especially in home settings before an eager, prodding student. Instead, concerts and live situations give a better idea of what Davis’s stable song list was, i.e.,
those tunes that worked no matter the situation and that defined who he was for most audiences. Between 1935 and 1971, there were some fifty recording sessions with Davis that have yielded commercial releases, including 22 live in concert, club, church (and in one case, street) settings. With nearly half of his extant recordings coming from a live context, a reliable list of concert favorites can be made. Once again, the split is even.

**Sacred (11)**
- “I’m a Soldier in the Army of the Lord” (3)
- “We Are the Heavenly Father’s Children” (3)
- “I Heard the Angels Singing” (3)
- “Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning” (3)
- “Soon My Work Will All Be Done” (3)
- “Let Us Get Together” (4)
- “Death Don’t Have No Mercy” (5)
- “Sun Is Going Down” (5)
- “Twelve Gates to the City” (5)
- “You Got to Move” (9)
- “Samson and Delilah” (15)

**Secular (11)**
- “Come Down to See Me Sometime” (3)
- “She Wouldn’t Say Quit” (3)
- “Sally, Where’d You Get Your Liquor From” (3)
- “Cocaine Blues” (3)
- “Lost John” (4)
- “Mountain Jack” (4)
- “Twelve Sticks” (4)
- “Candy Man” (4)
- “Maple Leaf Rag” (5)
- “Cincinnati Flow Rag” (6)
- “Buck Rag” (7)

Clearly, Davis knew and performed much more secular material than most people seem to think. Yet there is also validity to the truism that he abandoned sinful material later in life. Most of the secular song Davis played before an audience were either instrumentals or played without singing the words. This was especially the case with his
blues (discussed in Chapter Six), but of the top five secular songs he played live, only “Candy Man” had any words; the others – “Twelve Sticks,” Maple Leaf Rag,” “Cincinnati Flow Rag,” and “Buck Rag” – served instead as instrumental rag showpieces.

One can then understand how those who saw Davis play live might have thought he had abandoned secular song – the musical structures under blues and gospel can be similar, after all, without the words as a cue, especially for young revival audiences unfamiliar with distinctions in black song. Blues, in particular, was not as common live with only two of the above eleven songs containing a blues structure (three, if you count the folk rag form of “Twelve Sticks” as a type of folk blues expression). When such songs did appear, as in the second, all-secular half of a 1971 concert in Bristol, England, it came as something of a shock to those who assumed his set lists were mostly religious.\(^\text{12}\)

The reality was more nuanced. Davis’s core working repertoire balanced sacred and secular song, often in equal measure, and that fans remember his shows as primarily religious is testament to the strength of his gospel performances. Yet in an odd way, the opposite perception can also be correct. For the average folk fan who only knew Davis from his concerts, he was by and large a religious singer whose many secular instrumentals did not contradict that view; but for certain individuals, notably students Stefan Grossman and Ernie Hawkins, Davis opened up and revealed a whole different self that forces us to reconsider the true scope of his song craft.

SACRED MUSIC

Since so much of Davis’s sacred repertoire is discussed elsewhere in this dissertation, I have focused on only a few aspects here, namely the richness of his source material, rhyme schemes and organizational patterns in his religious songs, and a case study that offers an overlooked source for his most famous number, “Samson and Delilah.”

Though the subject matter – his Christian faith – would lead one to believe that Davis’s body of religious song was of a stylistic piece, the 122 documented tunes (or 54.71% of his extant repertoire) were just as diverse as his secular song. They include traditional African American ring shouts (“Blow Gabriel,” “Children of Zion”), spirituals (“Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning,” “Get Right Church”), Isaac Watts hymns (“We’re Marching to Zion”), shape note hymns (“I Belong to the Band – Hallelujah!”), camp meeting songs (“Old Time Religion”), hymnal selections (“Will There Be Any Stars”), turn of the century gospel numbers (“Lord, Stand By Me”), more modern gospel fare (i.e., the so-called “gospel blues” compositions, such as “He Knows How Much We Can Bear” by Roberta Martin and Thomas Dorsey’s “It’s a Highway to Heaven”), street evangelist favorites (“Motherless Children”), songs that circulated among the gospel quartets (“I Am the Light of the World,” “Got On My Travelin’ Shoes”),

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sermonettes (“Crucifixion”), and original compositions (“There’s Destruction in This Land,” “Oh Glory, How Happy I Am”).

As he did with secular music, Davis acquired religious songs from a variety of traditional, popular, and personal sources. This technique, in and of itself, belonged to an assemblage method in African American religious song that pulled from various sources including Bible verse, favorite hymns, one’s own compositions, and familiar refrains and choruses that fostered group identity and involvement.15

For example, one of his signature spiritual-like songs, “I Heard the Angels Singing,” shows a number of external and internal influences. The song was a conversion tale for Davis, who sang a loose narrative with redemption at its core against a plaintive E minor accompaniment on guitar. A typical performance had two parts, an A section verse with refrain (aBaB) played against a striking VI-i harmonic ground, and a B section chorus pattern (AAAB), that indicate different sources, which he then combined into one song. In the following late performance from his final studio album, the two parts divide neatly into a first and second section.

15See Eileen Southern, “Afro-American Musical Materials,” The Black Perspective in Music 1, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 24-32. Such assemblage in black folk hymnody was also widely used among white worshippers; see Dorothy D. Horn, Sing to Me of Heaven: A Study of Folk and Early American Materials in Three Old Harp Books (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1970). Borrowing as a creative act, of course, has been a defining quality in black music from the blues to hip-hop, and has been traced in part to various African communal groups, including the Vai of Liberia, who consider appropriation one of three ways to create a song alongside the input of the supernatural and an individual, the idea being that an inter-relationship in musical composition reflects and strengthens inter-tribal relations; see Lester P. Monts, “The Conceptual Nature of Music Among the Vai of Liberia,” The Black Perspective in Music 11, no. 2 (Fall 1983): 147-49.

Reverend Gary Davis, “I Heard the Angels Singing”\(^{16}\)

One day I was a-walking along – I heard the angels singing.
I heard a voice and I saw no one – I heard the angels singing.

What you reckon he said to me? – I heard the angels singing.
My sin’s been forgiven and my soul set free – I heard the angels singing.

Went down in the valley one day just to pray – I heard the angels singing.
I met this old devil coming down on my way – I heard the angels singing.

What you reckon that old devil said? – I heard the angels singing.
Said, “Heaven’s doors are closed, you might as well go back, it’s too late for you

\(^{16}\)Reverend Gary Davis, “I Heard the Angels Singing,” on From Blues to Gospel (Shout! Factory/Biograph DK 34007, 2004), original recording 1971.
to pray” – I heard the angels singing.

I said, “Get back, Satan, stand back out of my way” – I heard the angels singing. “I just don’t want to hear another word you say” – I heard the angels singing.

Went down in the valley and fell down on my knees – I heard the angels singing.
I said, “Lord, have mercy, save me, I’m a sinner, if you please” – I heard the angels singing.

Just about time I thought I was lost – I heard the angels singing.
My dungeon shook and my chain fell off – I heard the angels singing.

People come a-runnin’ miles and wanted to know what it’s all about – I heard the angels singing.
Well, the Holy Ghost hit me and I just couldn’t help but shout – I heard the angels singing.

It was one morning soon,
One morning soon, little children,
One morning soon,
I heard the angels singing.

I was down by my bedside,
Down by my bedside,
Down by my bedside,
I heard the angels singing.

I was on my knees a-praying,
I was on my knees a-praying, little children
I was on my knees a-praying,
I, I heard the angels singing.

Just a little while for a day,
A little while for a day,
A little while for a day,
I heard the angels singing.

One morning soon,
One morning soon, oh, oh, oh,
One morning soon,
I, I heard the angels singing,
I heard the angels singing,
Oh, oh, oh, angel, oh, oh, Lord,
I heard the angels, huh huh.
Davis used some of the verse sentiment in other songs. Specifically his 1935 recording of “Have More Faith in Jesus” suggests prototype couplet ideas he later incorporated into “I Heard the Angels Singing,” which didn’t show up in his documented repertoire until the early 1960s. Verse ideas in the former that show up in the latter are:

One day as I was walking along – a little more faith in my Jesus.  
Heard a little voice and I saw no one – just a little more faith in my Jesus.

Tell me what you reckon he said to me – have a little more faith in my Jesus.  
Said my sins been forgiven and my soul set free – just a little more faith in my Jesus.

One day I went into the valley to pray – a little more faith in my Jesus.  
I met ol’ Satan down on my way – just a little more faith in my Jesus.

And what you reckon he said to me – just a little more faith in my Jesus.  
Said I’m too young to die and I’m too old to pray – have a little more faith in my Jesus.

I fell down on my knees and began to pray – a little more faith in my Jesus.  
Made Satan out a liar and I stayed all day – just a little more faith in my Jesus.  

The musical bedrock of “I Heard the Angels Singing” also found its way in other songs by Davis, who played many of his religious tunes in E minor with similar turns of phrase (not unlike how a bluegrass guitarist might add the same bass run to every song in the key of G), including “Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning,” “Death Don’t Have No Mercy,” and “I Told Jesus I’d Bear My Burden If He’d Write My Name.”

Documented versions of the song elsewhere reinforce the notion that Davis fused two separate songs or song types for his arrangement. The earliest printed version of the song is in the 1874 book of African American song, *Hampton and Its Students*, and

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appears in a stanzaic form of rhythmic couplets with a refrain, though none of the
couplets are shared with Davis.\textsuperscript{18} Parallel verse ideas do show up, however, in Josh
White’s version of “My Father Is a Husbandman” (Banner 33330, 1933), a song Davis
himself recorded a few years later as “I Am the True Vine” (ARC 5-12-66, 1935).

Went down the valley one day to pray – [guitar answers].
I met ol’ Satan on my way – my father is a husbandman.

What do you reckon he said to me – [guitar answers].
You too young to serve God everyday – my father is a husbandman.\textsuperscript{19}

“Down in the valley” couplets were notably common and showed up in other
songs, including a variant of “The Good Old Way” called “Show Me the Way,” collected
by Newman Ivey White in Durham from informant Ed White of Creedmoor, North
Carolina:

I went down in the valley one day,
Good Lord, show me the way.
Talkin’ about dat good old way,
Good Lord, show me the way.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{18}See M. F. Armstrong and Helen W. Ludlow, \textit{Hampton and Its Students with Fifty Cabin and
Plantation Songs} (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1874), 246; reprinted in R. Nathaniel Dett, ed., \textit{Folk-
Songs of the Negro as Sung at Hampton Institute} (Hampton, Va.: Hampton Institute Press, 1927), 206.

\textsuperscript{19}Josh White, “My Father Is a Husbandman,” \textit{Complete Recorded Works 1929-1940 in
Chronological Order: Vol. 2, 24 November 1933 to 18 March 1935} (Document Records DOCD-5195,
1993). It’s worth speculating that, as a dialog song in which the singer converses with Satan, the song has a
possible connection between such black rhymes and the Appalachian reinvention of “Riddles Wisely
Expounded” (Child Ballad 1) in “The Devil’s Nine Questions”; see Roger D. Abrahams and George Foss,

\textsuperscript{20}Newman I. White, \textit{American Negro Folk-Songs} (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press,
documented by White, 93, from Auburn, Alabama, appeared to be a pastiche of several religious songs and
included lines more commonly associated with “I Heard the Angels Singing.” See also William E. Barton,
\textit{Old Plantation Hymns} (Boston: Lamson, Wolffe and Company, 1899; reprint, New York: AMS Press,
1972), 4; and Henry M. Belden and Arthur Palmer Hudson, ed., \textit{The Frank C. Brown Collection of North
1952), 610-11.
Curiously, such couplets were even appropriated for a “Lost John” variant sung as a prison axe song:

One day, one day . . . I was walkin’ along . . .
Well I heard a little voice . . . Couldn’t see no one . . .

The B section chorus, on the other hand, was the part in Davis’s arrangement most associated with other performances of “I Heard the Angels Singing,” including those collected by Lydia Parrish, those recorded in Livingston, Alabama, in 1939 by both Sims Tartt and group, and the trio of Doc Reed, Vera Hall, and Albert Allison (both as “One Mornin’ Soon” for the Library of Congress), and Reverend Edward Clayborn’s commercially-released take (“I Heard the Angels Singing,” Vocalion 1243, 1928). Davis must have known this latter version, for he essentially adopted its phrasal shape and half its stanzas for the B section of his own reading.

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Example 4.3. Reverend Edward W. Clayborn, “I Heard the Angels Singing.” CD track time 0:30-0:44. From Blind Willie Johnson and The Guitar Evangelists (JSP Records JSP7737, 2004); original recording 1928. Clayborn is playing slide guitar in a type of open G tuning with a capo tasto likely at the third fret, bringing the pitch closer to B-flat, hence the transcription in that key.

Clayborn verses shared with Davis:23

One morning soon, 
One morning soon,
One morning soon,  
I heard the angels singing.

All around my bed, 
All around my bed, 
All around my bed,  
I heard the angels singing.

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Down on my knees,
Down on my knees,
Down on my knees,
I heard the angels singing.

That’s not to say versions other than Davis’s did not combine more than one rhyme scheme or organized the song into a similar verse/chorus type structure, as appear in variants collected by Hoard W. Odum and Guy B. Johnson, and Byron Arnold, whose informant, an African American woman, Alma Robinson, of Florence, Alabama, learned it from a grandmother born in the antebellum South of the early 1860s:

Alma Robinson, “I Heard the Angels Singing”

Verses:
Some of these mornin’s bright and fair – I heard the angels singin’.
Goin’ to take my wings and try the air – I heard the angels singin’.

I believe, I believe, I do believe – I heard the angels singin’.
My soul King Jesus will receive – I heard the angels singin’.

Choruses:
One mornin’ soon (x 3)
I heard the angels singin’.

Down on my knees (x3)
I heard the angels singin’.

I couldn’t keep from cryin’ (x3)
I heard the angels singin’.

I jes had to moan (x3)
I heard the angels singin’.


25Byron Arnold, Folk Songs of Alabama (University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1950), 160.
In general, the reordering, addition, and subtraction that happens with folk hymnody – personally, regionally, or even in the context of printing a hymnal – has been considered at times a necessary expression of one’s worship, where embracing a musical tradition entails contributing to that tradition – becoming an active participant of a living faith.26 This goes beyond the pedagogical manner in which a preexisting tune or verse might have been placed in a hymn to facilitate learning and participation by congregants, especially the kinds of rural, sometimes musically illiterate populations that for well over a century fostered singing schools, camp meetings, and shape note hymnals in American folk hymnody. Not unlike bluesmen that creatively pick and choose from floating verses in the assembly of their blues performances, changing a hymn’s character, quality, and/or structure personalizes the experience for believers, as well.27 Even in the golden age of gospel composers, changes of key, tempo, scale, and text were all legitimate, even welcome, elements of performance practice. Writes gospel music scholar Horace Clarence Boyer, “Most gospel singers operate on the premise that gospel music is a singer’s art, not a composer’s art, and in performance their wishes dominate all others.”28

Davis’s appropriation, for example, of the Charles Tindley number, “Stand By Me,” merely consisted of its refrain, “stand by me,” combined with a line from the second stanza, “thou who never lost a battle,” that he then shaped into a chorus of his own device:

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Stand by me, stand by me.
Lord, you never lost a battle, stand by me.²⁹

The final product, while obvious in its debt to Tindley, was also pure Davis.

Among the earliest sacred songs Davis learned was “Children of Zion,” a ring-shout type spiritual that was grounded in Joel 2:23, in which God tells the “children of Zion” to rejoice because He has provided. Davis was exposed to this number (which bears some slight resemblance to the camp meeting tune, “Hebrew Children”³⁰) through his grandmother, and spoke of it accordingly: “That song there is over four hundred years old. Everybody sung that song. My grandmother sang it. My grandmother’s grandmother sang it, and her great-grandmother sang it, and her great-grandmother’s grandmother sang it.”³¹

He also picked up songs from churches (“Hold to God’s Unchanging Hand”), revival meetings (“Get Right Church”), fellow street musicians (“Bad Company Brought Me Here”), and recordings (the additive verse of “Itty Bitty Baby” looked in part to “Children Go Where I Send Thee” by the Golden Gate Quartet).³² We know some of his

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³¹Reverend Gary Davis talking about “Children of Zion,” 3:10-3:18 of track 18, CD 1b (Tape 1, side B), digital transfer of private recording by Ernie Hawkins, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, ca. 1968/70.

spirituals – the “deep seated cultural memory” of African American song\(^{33}\) – to have especially historic pedigree. “Blow, Gabriel,” for example, was documented as far back as the seminal 1867 spirituals collection *Slave Songs of the United States*, and “Out on the Ocean Sailing” is identified in *A Collection of Revival Hymns and Plantation Melodies* from 1883.\(^{34}\)

Davis was certainly familiar with the music of printed hymnals such as the immensely popular *Gospel Pearls*, and he had the kind of developed ear that could mimic in his own way the harmonizing of arranged SATB tunes. A good example is “‘Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus” (Stead/Kirkpatrick), no. 75 in *Gospel Pearls*. Davis, who called the song “How Sweet to Trust in Jesus,” adheres by and large to the original, down to the IV-ii setup into the final cadence, the use of a borrowed V/V chord at the half cadence, and the final I\(_6/4\)-V resolution. As the chart and subsequent transcription shows, Davis not only picked out the right harmonies but many of the original inversions (though inversions, in general, take a back seat to melodic content – a tonic G chord in seventh position might have a second-inversion D for its bass, which is non-functional in the sense that the primary concern is harmonic support under the melody B note, as in the opening chord of m. 1 in Example 4.1). He also made adjustments, of course, notably a key change from A flat to G, the striking use of a minor iii instead of a dyad passing tone (PT) in the opening phrase, the smoothing out of dotted rhythms to a triplet-like figure, and the predominant use of anticipations into the next chord.


Some of his songs had strong regional Piedmont connections, such as the spiritual “Twelve Gates to the City,” which Blind Boy Fuller and Sonny Terry also recorded.

Davis also shared a number of selections with Mitchell’s Christian Singers, who were from Kinston, North Carolina, southeast of Durham, and who, like Davis, were taken by J. B. Long to New York to record for ARC (their initial sessions, which preceded Davis’s by almost two years, contributed to store manager Long’s entree in the record business).

Of 78 sides the quartet made between 1934 and 1940, at least five were played by Davis:
“Traveling Shoes,” “Are You Working on the Building,” “Come on Ezekiel Let’s Go ’Round the Wall,” “Out on the Ocean Sailing,” and “My Time Ain’t Long.” Despite the Long connection, it’s doubtful if Davis had much interaction with the quartet, since they apparently never traveled beyond the Kinston region except to record. Indeed, Davis’s versions of the above songs share little with those by Mitchell’s Christian Singers other than basic melodic and refrain content. Davis, for example, played “Out on the Ocean Sailing” on banjo with only one shared verse, intimating an older nineteenth-century spiritual as a common source.

Other songs were more widespread, such as the ubiquitous “Old Ship of Zion,” which was recorded by black and white artists alike from the Pace Jubilee Singers and Silvertone Jubilee Quartet to Allison’s Sacred Harp Singers and Uncle Dave Macon; or “Gonna Sit on the Banks of the River,” which shows up in the repertoires of the Singing and Praying Bands of Maryland and even Reverend Al Green in Memphis, Tennessee. Finally, Davis wrote a number of his sacred songs. Among those for which he proudly took credit were “There Was a Time That I Was Blind,” “There’s Destruction in

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36There might be a sea shanty source in the song as well. For the nineteenth-century slave, spirituals were the soundtrack to everyday life on the plantation and functioned as work songs outside the church, where it was more common to hear lined out hymns. This included spirituals used by boatmen – think “Michael, Row the Boat Ashore” – who sang them to time oar movement, provide calm and encouragement in the midst of danger, and celebrate the passing of peril; see Robert W. Gordon, “The Negro Spiritual,” The Carolina Low-Country, ed., Augustine T. Smythe and others (New York: Macmillan Company for the Society for the Preservation of Spirituals, 1931), 191-92.

the Land,” “Oh Lord, Search My Heart,” “Oh Glory, How Happy I Am,” “Mind How
You’re Living,” “You Got to Go Down,” “Lo I Be with You Always,” and “Soon My
Work Will All Be Done.” While the found verse that circulated among some of the
above tunes puts doubt on full authorship, his claims were not unlike those of a bluesman
who takes credit for songs others have adapted and rearranged. The personalization of the
material is key as is the sense of divine bestowal. When discussing a song he wrote,
Davis liked to say it was given by the Holy Spirit or came to him in a dream.

Davis was raised and ordained Baptist, the most common denomination among
African Americans at the time, comprising by the time of his conversion in the 1930s,
more than sixty percent of America’s church-going black population. This held true as
well when he moved to New York, where by the end of the twentieth century, Baptists
continued to outnumber any other denomination in Harlem. The evangelical movement
had also crept into the Baptist faith, specifically the practices of southern Baptists, who
were often of the more denominationally autonomous “free will” variety and stressed
inerrancy, or supreme authority, of Biblical scripture. It’s no surprise, then, that there
was an element of Pentecostal and Holiness expression in Davis through his use of a
Pentecostal-approved secular instrument, the guitar, the further acceptance of “ragged,”
earthly rhythms, spirited, charismatic vocals, lyrical concerns with worldly sorrows and


40Cynthia Hickman, *Harlem Churches at the End of the 20th Century* (New York: Dunbar Press,

41James Leo Garrett, Jr., E. Glenn Hinson, and James E. Tull, *Are Southern Baptists
woes, and the makeshift settings of the street and storefront churches where he typically preached and sang. Even acceleration of tempo, a recognized Africanism, found special purpose in black religious song, especially in Pentecostal worship, where, in moving from the mind to the heart, tempo increases as the Holy Spirit takes over.\footnote{William T. Dargan, “Congregational Singing Traditions in South Carolina,” \textit{Black Music Research Journal} 15, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 42.}

The adaptation of his Baptist raising and theological training to something perhaps more Pentecostal was also necessary for the guitar-playing minister, who recalled that most of the music in churches where he was ordained was that of choirs and choruses, leaving little room for the kind of solo guitar style he cultivated.\footnote{Noblett, Rye, and Offord, “The Rev. Gary Davis,” \textit{Blues Unlimited} 39: 12.} Even as a Christian preacher, then, Davis had to operate removed from established churches and hence, away from mainstream society. In “The Negro in Durham,” Hugh Penn Brinton’s historic account of the North Carolina tobacco town during the time Davis lived there, the author described the many black churches of the working poor, the type of church Davis more likely frequented – small congregations, pastors as itinerant as the members, poorly heated in winter, plainly adorned with some windows broken and stuffed with paper, but also places of great emotional outpouring and spiritual fortitude.

Those churches which are the weakest and have the least educated ministers have congregations who need their help the most. They are persons who have not yet become thoroughly adjusted to an urban environment. Poverty stricken and unskilled, they have little chance for social contact except through their church which is a vital factor in their lives. It is a stabilizing force.\footnote{Hugh Penn Brinton, “The Negro in Durham: A Study of Adjustment to Town Life” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1930), 306-9, 331.}
Through the lens of having been born again, the disenfranchisement Davis no doubt felt in such circumstances must have also reassured if not empowered him to a degree. As a saved individual, Davis left the world of sin behind and, in doing so, acknowledged on a spiritual level that he had willingly separated from a world that had already proved itself unavailable to him. This was the case for isolated frontier folk at camp meetings in the nineteenth century and continued to be the case for street corner evangelists in the twentieth century, who existed on the fringes of modern society.45

Yet Davis the Baptist preacher distrusted some of the more extreme expressions of faith associated with Pentecostal and Holiness movements, especially Holy Spirit possession, which he thought was sometimes used to take out one’s frustrations on other church members:

Gary Davis: I heard of em might-nigh killin each other. Said they had the Holy Ghost. An ole woman in church one time got to shoutin. She stepped on another woman’s foot. She had all the corns I reckon in the world on huh feet. That woman weighted two hundred. She stretched out huh heel an threwed huh right up in the pulpit. That woman couldn’t hep it though cause she step on every corn she had. Couldn’t hep it. Look like she waited till she got where that woman was to step on huh toes.

Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold: You think she might have done it on purpose?

Davis: She didn’t have no use for the woman though. She didn’t like huh. It happened that night. She’s was gon shout it out – couldn’t fight it out. They fell out about a man, I think it was.46


46Reverend Gary Davis, interview by Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold, April/May 1951, TMs (photocopy), the Alan Lomax Archive, New York City, reel 4, part 2, p. 4.
Still, he also told Harold in the same interview that, “Nobody can’t do nothing with you when you git the Holy Spirit. You’re humbled, chile, when you git the Holy Spirit. You ain’t gon hurt nobody.” Davis had no problem letting emotion, if not the Holy Spirit, take over in certain songs. One of his greatest in that regard was “Oh Glory, How Happy I Am,” a song in which movement on the guitar perfectly captured the subject matter – a meeting ground of musical and spiritual elation (and notice in the transcription below how he used open strings in cross relation against fretted strings, especially on the last beats of a measure, which allowed smooth shifting up and down the neck). The result was (and still is) joyous to hear, sing, and play. Ernie Hawkins has a noticeably philosophical take on the tune:

If you’re shouting, “Oh glory, how happy I am,” in the high register, it works on you. It makes you happy. It’s a masterpiece in the way it works on you psychologically. You know the song, “When the Red, Red Robin Comes Bob, Bob, Bobbing Along?” That song does the same thing. It’s a kid’s song. “There’ll be no more sobbin’ when he starts throbbin’ his old sweet song. Wake up, wake up, you sleepy head. Get up, get up, get out of bed.” He’s singing, “Cheer up, cheer up, the sun is red. Live, love, laugh, and be happy.” The red robin is a resurrection symbol. It’s the rising sun. It’s springtime. Rebirth. When you go back and sing this child’s song about rebirth, you participate psychologically in that rebirth. It’s a deep, deep song, and “Oh, Glory” works the same way.

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47Ibid.

Example 4.5. Reverend Gary Davis, “Oh Glory, How Happy I Am.” Video track time 1:06:18-1:06:32. From Rev. Gary Davis: The Video Collection (Vestapol 13111, 2008); original recording 1967. The note in parentheses in m .1 indicates a string fretted by the left hand but not articulated by the right hand.

It bears mention that certain songs and/or song types are missing from Davis’s religious oeuvre, notably the popular spiritual “The Blind Man Stood on the Road and Cried” (revisited in Chapter Eight), and any songs about Job, who was not just the great sufferer of the Old Testament, but a “compassionate witness” to black suffering. 49

49 Olivia and Jack Solomon, eds., “Honey in the Rock”: The Ruby Pickens Tartt Collection of Religious Folk Songs from Sumter County, Alabama (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1991), 76. Write the Solomons, “With the story of Job the slave could all too readily identify. As the emblem of suffering Job appears everywhere in Afro-American folk religious literature, song, and sermon,” 74. See also xx.
Spirituals on Job have been called among the most outstanding examples of black religious song, according to Harold Courlander, who documented a remarkable version. Yet like the “Blind Man” of black hymnody, Job was perhaps too mired in misfortune to have appealed to Davis, whose sacred music offered few moments of true anguish or helplessness (not to be confused with his frequent theme of death). Self-pity and misery, after all, were emotions best reserved for Davis’s blues. His religious song, in contrast, stressed all that was affirming and victorious over human suffering.

**LYRIC FORMS**

As inventive as Blind Boy Fuller was with blues lyric forms, so was Davis with sacred forms. Most of his religious song operated from a core stanza or chorus that had a simple AABA or AAAB type structure, and almost all were eight or sixteen-bar structures in common meter (“I Am a Pilgrim,” “Near the Cross,” “Shine On Me,” and “Soon My Work Will All Be Done” being exceptions in 3/4 time). The camp meeting/revival hymn structures of Davis’s choruses were simple for a reason: they made their appeal honestly and instantly. As Don Cusic has noted, addressing the popularity of such music: “They are timeless songs because of the repetitiveness but also because of their emotional appeal – they are songs that can inspire joy or comfort in sorrow, a verbalizing of people's feelings and thoughts . . . Musically and lyrically simple, their

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power rests in their emotional impact and their ability to be learned and sung easily."51

But Davis introduced much variety within this bedrock of repetition and regularity. His
first religious recordings from 1935 and 1949 – which comprise slightly more than ten
percent of his documented sacred output – give us a strong indication.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lyric structures of Gary Davis’s religious songs from 1935/1949 sessions:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. “I Am the True Vine”: V: aBaB Ch: AAAB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. “I Am the Light of the World”: V: abcbe Ch: ABAB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. “O Lord, Search My Heart”: AAAB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. “You Can Go Home”: V: abBA Ch: AABA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. “Twelve Gates to the City”: V: abcdB/ababB Ch: AAAB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. “You Got to Go Down”: V: sermonette Ch: AAB/B1A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. “I Belong to the Band – Hallelujah!” V: abBA Ch: AABA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. “Lord, Stand By Me”: V: ABAB/sermonette Ch: AABA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. “I’m Gonna Meet You at the Station” V: cdBA/ free verse (abcdefg) Ch: AABA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A final sacred song from these sessions was also the one most unusually conceived, “Lord, I Wish I Could See.” Discussed in depth in Chapter Eight, the gospel

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number, which Davis claimed he wrote as a teenager ca. 1911, had a core couplet, AA, at the front of eight of its eleven quatrains. In addition, the most frequent quatrain was AAbA. Mostly, however, Davis alternated rhyme schemes in an almost extemporaneous outpouring that suited the emotional underpinnings of its subject, blindness:

“Lord, I Wish I Could See,” (1935, eleven verses)^52:

V1: AAbA  V7: AAaA
V2: aaba  V8: AAaA
V3: AAab  V9: AbcA
V4: AAb/bA  V10: AAbA
V5: AAaA  V11: aa(spoken)b
V6: AAbA

Predictability and lyrical stability come in the first two lines of each stanza, which are either a literal repeat (AA eight times) or a rhyme (aa twice). The final line also has a strong degree of stability, with seven stanzas ending on a literal repeat (A) and two landing on a rhyme that matches the first line (a). But within this overall scheme, only two organizational patterns are an exact match (three stanzas with AAbA and two with AAaA). In later versions, Davis retained a similar balance of looseness versus structure.

“There Was a Time When I Was Blind” (1956, nine verses)^53:

V1: AAbA  V6: AAbc
V2: AAbc  V7: AAb/bA
V3: AAbA  V8: AAbc
V4: AAbc  V9: AAbc
V5: AAb/bA

“Lord I Wish I Could See” (1971, eight verses)^54:

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Davis established a number of regular patterns for his choruses and verses though no verse and chorus patterns are ever exactly the same within any given song. Not counting “Lord, I Wish I Could See” (its own special case as discussed above), the other thirteen songs have essentially five chorus patterns: AABA (6, with two having an additional interior rhyme in the third line, AAB/B/A); AAAB (4); AAAA (1); ABAB (1); and ABAC (1). The verse patterns, on the other hand, are much more diverse: aBaB (2); abcb (2); spoken sermonettes (2); aBbc (1); abcdB (1); ababB (1); abBa (1); AAAB (1); ABAB (1); cdBA (1); and free verse (abcdefg, 1).

What this shows is that Davis kept the participatory part of his hymnody – generally, the choruses – simple, while he gave a more inventive, less predictable touch to the verses. Like much folk hymnody, the predominant use of repetition in Davis’s material was there not only as a mnemonic aid for ease of retention, participation, and even verse generation, but to help induce religious frenzy and catharsis.\(^55\) Still other devices encouraged participation, providing at once structural cohesion and departure.

The most common, word substitution, altered a word or short phrase from verse to verse in an otherwise repeated stanza, what has been called an “addin’-to song.”\(^56\) In “You Can


\(^{55}\) Ethel Park Richardson, American Mountain Songs (New York: Greenberg, 1927), 112.

\(^{56}\) Arnold, Folk Songs of Alabama, 155. Writes Arnold, “The purpose of this adding-to seems to be to continue the emotion brought forth by the music and words until everyone in the congregation not only has joined in the singing but also has been moved by the religious feeling growing out of it.”
Go Home,” for example, Davis sang a chorus and verse that required switching out one word (underlined) to provide structure, length, and added meaning:

“You Can Go Home” 57

[Guitar intro]

You can go home,
You can go home.
Tell your mother she treated you wrong,
And you can go home.

You have a mother won’t treat you right,
Take it to yourself and God alone.
Tell your mother she’s treated you wrong,
And you can go home.

You can go home,
You can go home.
Tell your mother she treated you wrong,
You can go home.

Talk. [Guitar break]

You can go home,
You can go home.
Tell your sister she treated you wrong,
You can go home.

You have a sister won’t treat you right,
Take it to yourself and God alone.
Tell your sister she treated you wrong,
And you can go home.

Talk to me. [Guitar break]

Heh?

Uh, you can go home,
You can go home.
Tell that preacher he treated you wrong,
And you can go home.

[Guitar break x 2]

You have a brother won’t treat you right,
Take it to yourself and God alone.
Tell your brother he treated you wrong,
And you can go home.

You can go home,
You can go home.
Tell your brother he treated you wrong,
And you can go home.

You have a deacon won’t treat you right,
Take it to yourself and God alone.
Tell that deacon he treated you wrong,
And you can go home.

You can go home,
You can go home.
Tell that deacon he treated you wrong,
And you can go home.

[Guitar break]

Talk to me.

[Guitar break]

Family and church members were used as verse-generating substitutions in other songs such as “You Got to Go Down” and “Tryin’ to Get to Heaven in Due Time,” and Davis extended the approach to occupations (“Lord, Stand By Me”), conditional states (“I Cannot Bear My Burden By Myself”), and even sins (“Pure Religion”).

“SAMSON AND DELILAH”: A CASE STUDY

The most important song, sacred or secular, in Davis’s repertoire was known variously as “Samson and Delilah” or “If I Had My Way.” It was first recorded in the early 1950s and became his signature tune in later years, especially once Peter, Paul and
Mary had a hit with it in 1962. It was his most recorded and issued song, and in addition to his own records, versions appear on no less than 22 music compilations since 1960. As it turns out, the song was one of his most stable (i.e., arranged) as well.

A spiritual with a long history in African American song, “Samson and Delilah” tells the Old Testament story of Samson found in Judges 13-16. In the biblical account, an angel visits Manoah and his wife and tells them they will bear a child who will deliver the Israelites from the Philistines. The angel further instructs that the child is to never partake of alcohol or cut his hair, essentially taking the ascetic vow of a nazirite. This child, Samson, grows up and has a series of heroic adventures and trials that would seem to make him less a savior than an indulgent, irrational, and violent strongman. On his way to marry a Philistine wife, he fights and kills a lion. At the wedding feast, he poses a riddle to his groomsmen based on his tussle with the wild beast. Not knowing the answer, they convince Samson’s wife to entice the answer from him. When they answer correctly, Samson goes into a rage, kills thirty Philistines, and rewards his groomsmen with the dead men’s garments. Samson’s wife is given to his best man, and he is given the younger sister. In another fit of rage, he sets fire to the tails of three hundred foxes that race through the Philistines’ fields, burning them up. The Philistines counter by killing his father-in-law and wife, and he answers by slaying more of them. Hiding in a cave, Samson surrenders to three thousand men from Judah, who bind him with ropes. Before he can be handed over to the Philistines, Samson breaks the ropes, grabs the jaw of an ass, and slays one thousand of his enemy. He then presides over Israel for twenty years. While in Gaza lying with a prostitute, he is ambushed but rips up the city’s gate and escapes. He then falls in love with Delilah, who has been paid by the Philistines to find
the secret of Samson’s strength. After much misdirection, Samson tells her his strength rests in his hair, which Delilah then has cut off. Samson is captured, blinded, and imprisoned. During a temple ceremony, Samson, whose hair has grown back, prays to God for strength and topples the temple pillars, killing himself along with many more Philistines.58

The question, of course, is why someone described as a “tragicomic example of selfishly wasted brute strength”59 – someone who kills out of vanity, and whose sexual proclivities placed him outside the norm of Israelite society60 – became such a religious folk hero within African American culture. Foremost, he was willing to die for his freedom, a sacrifice that came with a sense of self-destiny and ability to bear one’s burdens. It’s no stretch to overlay the plight of enslaved black Americans in the nineteenth century with the enslaved Israelites, nor the song’s refrain, “If I had my way, I’d tear that building down,” with the idea of dismantling the institution of slavery. In Samson was a savior who freed his people in this world, not the next, offering a contemporary applicability for slaves and later African Americans.61 That black singers were able to express “barely suppressed rage” by identifying with the protagonist has further been noted.62 But his failings cannot be overlooked, for Samson served as a model

58This narrative is paraphrased from The Holy Bible, King James Version (Nashville: The Gideons International, 1988).


of hope and redemption in spite of his all too human nature, which was understood by a people who have generally recognized and accepted the conflicted, imperfect paths of its men even into today’s hip-hop culture.\textsuperscript{63} Samson was persecuted but triumphant, after all, the outcast recast as liberator. It’s almost as if African Americans found in Samson, a “badman,” the embodiment of the racist misperceptions of black men in the American South, a caricature of brutish strength and sexual appetites who nonetheless fulfilled a divine purpose. God had redeemed what others considered irredeemable. Ultimately, Samson is a flawed hero, but in his retaliation against the dominant power group, he also shares much with the folk anti-heroes of African American bad man ballads.

As a spiritual and a sermon topic, the story of Samson was recorded and documented many times throughout the African American south. In a congregational setting, it might be used as a “hallie,” that is, a hallelujah song for the taking of collection.\textsuperscript{64} It appeared in “ballet sheet” form as “Samson Tore the Building Down,” which is how it apparently made its recorded debut in 1923 by the Paramount Jubilee Singers.\textsuperscript{65} Other pre-World war II versions include:

1927: Rev. T. E. Weems, “If I Had My Way I’d Tear the Building Down” 
   \hspace{1em} (Columbia 14254-D) 
1927: Rev. T. T. Rose, “If I Had My Way” \textsuperscript{64} (Paramount 12482)

\textsuperscript{63}Charles Keil offers provocative thoughts on this in terms of blues culture; see his classic tome, \textit{Urban Blues} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 147-48.

\textsuperscript{64}Evans, liner notes, \textit{Deep River of Song: Mississippi: Saints & Sinners}.

1927: Blind Willie Johnson, “If I Had My Way I’d Tear the Building Down” (Columbia 14343-D)
1933: Mrs. L. C. Gatlin “Delia (If I Had My Way)” (Texas, Library of Congress)
1939: The Golden Gate Quartet, “If I Had My Way” (Bluebird B8306)
1941: The Heavenly Gate Quartet, “If I Had My Way I’d Tear the Building Down” (Tennessee, Library of Congress)
1941: Deacon Tom Jones, Rev. C. H. Savage, and group “If I Had My Way, I’d Tear the Building Down” (Mississippi, Library of Congress)

No two versions are entirely alike, and singers and preachers would stress certain episodes of the story depending on the message they wished to impart (demonstrating how a religious song’s “matrix of meaning” – the many situational and functional aspects surrounding its use – can create new spiritual identities within the song from one congregation to the next\(^\text{66}\)). One folk sermon on the topic of Samson, for example, proposed that he was strong in the Lord until he met up with the fairer sex.\(^\text{67}\) Reverend T. E. Weems wrapped his verses around “that old building of sin that troubled the Christian past,”\(^\text{68}\) while in the sermon, “Samson and the Woman,” Reverend J. M. Gates used the story to focus on the dangers of hubris: “I don’t care how strong you get – time is gonna bring you down. I don’t care how pretty you look – time is gonna bring you down. I don’t care how high you hold your head – time is gonna bring you down.”\(^\text{69}\)


\(^\text{67}\)Alan Lomax, The Folk Songs of North America in the English Language, 465.


When the spiritual is summoned, the stable element is almost always the refrain—“If I had my way, I would tear this building down”—as well as certain couplet rhyme schemes: fair/hair; attack/back; paws/jaws; dead/head; and hand/natural man. Other than that, all are text heavy though details as well as chronological or narrative order change from performer to performer. A number of singers mention the blinding of Samson: Reverend T. E. Weems, and the Golden Gate Quartet, for example, while Deacon Tom Jones and Rev. C. H. Savage lead with it. Curiously, Gary Davis and Willie Johnson—two blind performers—omit that detail.

Davis’s arrangement is one of the more reductive since he made room for guitar breaks in the song. It was also among the most stable, or arranged, songs in his guitar repertoire. He sang eleven couplets organized in three sections about Samson and Delilah (five couplets), Samson and the jawbone (three couplets), and Samson and the lion (three couplets), usually in that order, as in the following typical treatment.

“Samson and Delilah”

[Guitar intro]

If I had my way, if I had my way,
If I had my way, I would tear this ol’ building down.

Well, Delilah she was a woman, she was fine and fair.
She had good looks, God knows, and coal black hair.
Delilah she gained ol’ Samson’s mind,

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70 A number of lines associated with “Samson and Delilah” also show up in other sacred songs, notably “You’d Better Run,” documented by John W. Work, American Negro Songs: 230 Folk Songs and Spirituals, Religious and Secular (New York: Crown, 1940; reprint, Mineola, N. Y.: Dover, 1998), 93; and the popular spiritual “That’s Another Witness for My Lord” (a.k.a., “My Soul Is a Witness for My Lord” and “Witness for My Lord”). In a version collected by A. E. Perkins, six couplets are about Samson including four shared by Davis; see Perkins, “Negro Spirituals from the Far South,” Journal of American Folklore 35, no. 137 (July-September 1922): 230-31.

When first he saw this woman at the Philistine. 
Delilah she sat down on Samson’s knee, 
Said, “Tell me where your strength lie, if you please.”
She spoke so kind, God knows, she talked so fair, 
’Til Samson said, “Delilah, you can cut off my hair.
You can shave my head clean as my hand, 
And my strength come natural as any other man.”

If I had my way, yeah! If I had my way, 
If I had my way, I’d tear this ol’ building down

(Spoken: Great God almighty, talk to me.)

[Guitar break, 24 bars over full verse and chorus]

(Spoken during break: Yes, sir. Yeah! Talk to me, now. 
Uh. Uh huh. Talk. Uh huh. 
Talk to me. Let me hear you. Talk to me. 
Yeah! Make me fell good. What! 
Talk to me. Uh huh.)

Well, you read about ol’ Samson called from his birth.  
He was the strongest man that ever had lived on earth. 
So one day while Samson was a-walking along, 
He looked on the ground and saw ol’ jawbone. 
He stretched out his arm, God knows, it broke like thread, 
When he got through moving ten thousand was dead, good God.

If I had my way, if I had my way, 
If I had my way, I would tear this ol’ building down

Well, ol’ Samson and the lion got in an attack, 
Samson he jumped up on the lion’s back. 
So you read about this lion had killed a man with his paws, 
But Samson he got his hand in the lion’s jaws. 
He rid that beast until he killed him dead, 
And the bees made honey in the lion’s head, umm.

If I had my way, if I had my way, 
If I had my way, I would tear this ol’ – oww!

If I had my way, if I had my way, 
If I had my way, I would – good God.
This organization held true in almost all of Davis’s two-dozen documented versions (Legend: H = home recording, S = studio, C = concert, V = video, P = private tape; D = Delilah stanza, S = Samson stanza, L = lion stanza, all followed by number of couplets):

1953H:   D5, S3, L3
1956S:   D5, S3, L3
1958C:   D5, S3
1959C:   D5, S3, L3
1960S:   D5, S3, L3
1962C:   D5, L3
1962C:   D5, S3, L3
1962C:   D5, S3
1963C:   D5, S3, L3
1964C:   D5, L3
1964C:   D5, S3, L3
1964C:   D5, S3, L3
1964P:   D5
1965C:   D5, S3, L3
1966H:   D5, S3, L3
1967V:   D5, L3
1967C:   D5, S3, L3
1968C:   D5, S3, L3
1968/70P: D5, S3, L3
1970C:   D5
1970V:   D5, S3
1971S:   D5, S3, L3
1971C:   D5, S3, L3

As the above list shows, Davis sang all three verses in sixteen, or two-thirds, of the performances, and he sang them in the same order every time. An additional six performances have two of the three verses and two have only one. All versions contain the Delilah stanza, which was almost always followed by an extended guitar break.

\(^{72}\) In this live Carnegie Hall performance, Davis started to play the lion stanza but the audience began applauding, and he stopped the song short.

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72In this live Carnegie Hall performance, Davis started to play the lion stanza but the audience began applauding, and he stopped the song short.
Where fewer verses exist, additional choruses take their place. To reiterate, this shows “Samson and Delilah” to have been a remarkably stable song in his repertoire.

The order has a peculiar logic, as well. Davis essentially tells the story backwards, a deconstructionist approach that leaves out many details (the riddle, his capture, his blinding, the final act of tearing down the temple) and renders the rest a face-paced narrative. Outwitted by Delilah, Samson loses his strength at the start. He then breaks free of the ropes, and kills not three but ten thousand men with a jawbone. Finally, he wrestles with the lion and partakes of his bounty, the honey. This is hardly a flawed hero but an empowered figure whose actions lead not to ruin but reward. When we factor in the other “actor” of this passion play – the guitar – “Samson and Delilah” takes on added metaphoric resonance. Davis found a symbol in Samson for what it meant to overcome the negative forces in his life, and his guitar accompaniment, replete with virtuosic flourishes – finger snaps, hammer-ons, bass runs, tambour, golpe, and bent-note double-stops (see Example 3.7 for a transcription) – enacted the ritual with musical movement that was every bit as muscular as Samson himself.

Given his highly personalized treatment of the song, it becomes easy to see his hand on other versions from the 1960s, notably Peter, Paul and Mary’s reading, “If I Had My Way,” which employed the same three verses in slightly different order (Samson and jawbone, Samson and lion, Samson and Delilah), and omitted the “Philistine” couplet but was otherwise faithful. A 1965 recording of “Samson and Delilah” (Epic 9776) by the Staple Singers also followed Davis’s lead, with the same verses and order though Roebuck “Pop” Staples added a fourth, final stanza that provided Biblically-accurate resolution:
They caught ol’ Samson by surprise,
Picked up a stick and punched out his eye.
Bring him on down by the judgment hall,
Chained him to that stone cold wall.
Left him there till his hair grew brown,
Samson tore that building down. 73

It is common to cite Blind Willie Johnson’s performance as the model which
davis drew on, and while he was no doubt familiar with that version, another recording
from the same year, 1927, emerges as the more persuasive candidate. A sanctified
performance with piano, “If I Had My Way” as recorded by Rev. T. T. Rose and group is
remarkably close to Davis’s and certainly influenced his own arrangement. Not only does
it share nine of his eleven couplets, but it is essentially framed like Davis’s: it opens with
an instrumental break, starts with Delilah, moves to Samson (touching on his Philistine
wife, whom Davis merged with the Delilah figure), then ends with the lion, including the
final line, “the bees made honey in the lion’s head.” 74 All this and more, including the
emphatic vocal, speaks to Davis having heard, if not owned this 78.

73 “Samson and Delilah” on The Staple Singers, Freedom Highway (Columbia CK 47334, 1991);
original recording 1965. Oddly, the Staples piece was subtitled as a “tribute to Blind Willie Johnson” on
Make You Happy (Epic EG 30635, 1971). Bobby Darin’s “Sermon of Samson” – recorded only months
after Peter, Paul, and Mary released “If I Had My Way” – is intriguingly based on the same textual
source(s) as the Staple Singers version, including the final verse. Darin and arranger Walter Raim claimed
writing credit for the song, which appeared on Earthy! (Capitol 8126, 1963), but which had more to do with
Elvis Presley in the feel of its pop performance/arrangement than Peter, Paul and Mary, the Staple Singers,
or Rev. Gary Davis; see David Evanier, Roman Candle: The Life of Bobby Darin (New York: Rodale,
2004), 238.

74 Blind Willie Johnson also used the line about bees making honey in the lion’s head though he
employed it in the middle of the song – just one of numerous details that made his version of the spiritual
different in structure and narrative than that by Rev. T. T. Rose from the same year, not to mention Davis
later on.
“If I Had My Way,” Rev. T. T. Rose

[Piano intro]

Oh, Delilah was a woman fine and fair.
She had pleasant looks and coal black hair.
Delilah shecaught Samson’s mind,
When he first saw the woman of the Philistine.

Lord (If I had my way)
Old Samson cried. (If I had my way)
In this wicked world. (If I had my way)
Lord knows I’d tear this building down.

Oh, you read about Samson from his birth.
He was the strongest man ever lived on earth.
You read way back in the ancient times,
Lord, he slayed three thousand of the Philistine.

Lord (If I had my way)
Old Samson cried. (If I had my way)
In this wicked world. (If I had my way)
Lord knows I’d tear this building down.

Lord, Samson he went a-wandering about.
Lord, the strength of Samson was never found out.
The Philistine sat on his knee,
Said, “Tell me, Samson, where your strength lie please.”
Lord, she looked so pretty, she talked so fair,
Old Samson said, “Well, now it’s in my hair.
You shave my head just as clean as your hand,
Lord, and then I will become like a natural man.”

Lord (If I had my way)
Old Samson. (If I had my way)
In this wicked world. (If I had my way)
Lord knows I’d tear this building down.

Oh, Samson and the lion they got in attack.
Lord, Samson he jumped on that lion’s back.
Lord they said that the lion killed a man with his paw.
But Samson got his hands in the lion’s jaw.
Lord, he rode that lion and killed him dead.
Lord, the bees made honey in the lion’s head.

75“If I Had My Way,” Rev. T. T. Rose, on Gospel Singers and Preachers: Complete Recorded
Works and Supplements 1926-1948 (Document Records, DOCD-5585, 1997); original recording 1927.
Lord (If I had my way) 
Old Samson cried. (If I had my way) 
In this wicked world. (If I had my way) 
Lord knows I’d tear this building down.

Help me sing it now. (If I had my way) 
Old Samson cried. (If I had my way) 
In this wicked world. (If I had my way) 
Lord knows I’d tear this building down.

As for Blind Willie Johnson, his rendition of “If I Had My Way” (Example 4.3) was the only guitar evangelist version of “Samson” to be recorded prior to Davis’s first documented performance in 1953, and a few similarities exist: the choice of key/chord shape (G); an almost obsessive iteration of verse melody notes on the tonic; and propulsive bass note activity. In this latter point of comparison, Davis especially seemed to use Johnson’s pentatonic bass ideas as a jumping off point for his own bass string riffing (Example 4.4).

Despite the similarity in style, the two performances are more different than alike. Johnson the street preacher offered a simple guitar accompaniment to his impassioned Biblical narrative, a strum-accented part filled with repeated bass riffs that shadow in heterophonic fashion his melody. Davis offered an equally emphatic vocal, pushing his voice an octave higher at certain cadences, but his guitar was the charismatic star,
running up and down the fretboard with assured power, freedom, and finesse. Led by his driving right hand thumb, Davis maintained a motoric groove on the guitar, adding a subtle alternation of clutched and open position chords as well as open and fretted strings to vary the tone and attack (as in his use of the open D and G strings against the fifth fret D and G – see measures 1-2 in ex. 4.2). “Samson and Delilah” was simply the culmination of everything that went into Davis’s musical abilities, a road map of string band finesse and ministering frenzy that pushed his personal limits and the limits of all who would dare imitate him. It’s possible that Davis read into the song’s subject something of his own shortcomings, libido included, but still accepted that he was an agent of the Lord just like Samson, who also suffered, became blind, and yet made his own destiny with God’s blessing. In Davis’s case, virtuosity became the means to defeat a “wicked world.”
CHAPTER V

“LITTLE BOY, LITTLE BOY, WHO MADE YOUR BRITCHES?”: NON-BLUES SECULAR SONG

INTRODUCTION

Reverend Gary Davis’s secular repertory consisted of much more than blues. His range, in fact, was remarkable and went from folk song, minstrelsy, and ragtime pieces to marches, hokum tunes, and vaudeville pop hits, all given highly personalized adaptations. Yet such material was also deeply rooted in African American vernacular traditions both from the Carolina Piedmont and the South at large, which this chapter will illustrate. Looking at this body of song provides as much a glimpse into Davis the pre-gospel musician as his blues legacy (discussed in Chapter Six), and it serves to remind that in the study of pre-WWII African American vernacular guitar, the categorization of such musicians as simply “bluesmen” can not only be limiting but ultimately misleading.

In search of an alternate definition, we might look to folklorist Howard W. Odum’s observation from the time Davis would have begun making music professionally. Odum, whose 1911-published findings came from fieldwork he did in Georgia, Tennessee, and Mississippi, noted that traditional black musicians often fell into one of three categories: “songster” (any person who regularly sang or played songs); “musicianer” (an expert on the fiddle or banjo, though later he adds guitar to the instrument list, noting further the musicianer’s skill at rag pieces, or “rag-times”); and “music physicianer” (a person, often a professional musician, who possessed elements of
the above combined with travel).¹ With that in mind, Davis the secular singer/guitarist might then be considered a “music physicianer”: he played music regularly, was skilled in ragtime, worked as a professional, and was highly peripatetic as a result.

The versatility of Davis the “music physicianer” is explored herein, as is his individualized response to the ever-revolving door that stood between tradition and popular song a century ago, a back-and-forth between the two that sometimes makes a conundrum of song classification within the broader category of African American secular music, not to mention Davis’s own musically diverse oeuvre. In terms of cultural geography, the hearth, or origin, of a particular song can be difficult if not impossible to trace, given the mutual movement that took place between orally transmitted traditions and composed sources. As Newman Ivey White observed when he was collecting folk songs not long after the dawn of the blues, determining the traditional from the popular was daunting even then, “impaired” as he wrote “by the fact that the folk blues and the factory product are to-day almost inextricably mixed.”² A tune such as “Hesitation Blues,” for example, would have circulated within many contexts, from rural house parties to the vaudeville stage to commercial sheet music, all by the late 1910s, which begs the question: is it a blues, a folk song, or a popular song? Truth is, it could be all of the above, and a number of other songs in Davis’s repertory traveled in similar fashion, moving in and out of various performance contexts as songs adapted to particular players.

¹Howard W. Odum, “Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes.” Journal of American Folklore 24, no. 93 (July-September 1911): 259-60. Odum also admits a certain looseness to the application of these terms, which may be synonymous in some cases.

and functions. Given the above, we can nonetheless make a number of conclusions based on what we have in the way of documented songs by Davis.

We have 102 known secular songs/singular performances by Davis, which accounts for 45.74% of his 223 documented songs. Yet sixty-one, or essentially 60%, of these secular tunes, were recorded only once, while sixty-four, or 62.7%, were only documented in non-studio/non-concert settings as in teaching or at a party (I have included “Cross and Evil Woman Blues” – i.e., “Ice Pick Blues” – since all versions post-1935 were recorded privately). The above data confirm two things: a) Davis didn’t abandon his secular material once he became a minister; b) he nonetheless chose carefully where and to whom he played such songs. Only twenty-eight secular songs were ever recorded in abundance (that is, more than once or twice), with most of them live staples of Davis. Yet these are also enough to discount his supposed rejection of “sinful” songs later in life. An opposite portrait instead emerges, one that finds Davis playing with increased frequency his secular material from the early 1960s on, and most concert set lists from this time included at least several non-religious numbers. The following secular songs, listed in order of performance frequency, were all popular Davis standards during the revival era: “Buck Rag” (22); “Cincinnati Flow Rag” (21); “Candy Man” (20); “Maple Leaf Rag” (15); “Mountain Jack” (15); “Twelve Sticks” (15); “Talk on the Corner” (10); “Cocaine” (10); “Sally, Where’d You Get Your Liquor From?” (9); “Walkin’ Dog Blues” (8); “Hesitation Blues” (9); “Soldier’s Drill” (7); and “Lost John” (7). Of these thirteen songs, seven (“Buck Rag,” “Cincinnati Flow Rag,” “Maple Leaf Rag,” “Twelve Sticks,” “Walkin’ Dog Blues,” “Soldier’s Drill,” and “Lost John”) were instrumentals that emphasized Davis’s fingerpicking abilities or, in the case of “Lost
John,” his way around a harmonica. Of the remaining six, only “Talk on the Corner” was performed consistently with lyrics (all 10 of its recordings). The others, when split into instrumental performance/performance with words, lay out as follows: “Candy Man” (8/12); “Mountain Jack” (12/3); “Cocaine” (5/5); “Sally, Where’d You Get Your Liquor From” (2/7); and “Hesitation Blues” (4/5). We might say then that out of 73 performances of Davis’s most frequently-played secular numbers with known words, only slightly more than half – 42, or 57.5% – were ever given the words by Davis, and of those, only 12, or 16.4%, were performed with words in concert. This would explain why most people who casually recalled seeing Davis live during the folk revival did not remember him playing secular material, assuming therefore that he only played religious songs later in life.

Davis instead reserved the greatest amount and variety of secular song for the relative privacy of the home either at informal gatherings such as parties or, most of all, in the many lessons he taught. Teaching, it turns out, was the most important outlet for Davis to share secular material, though libations could also prompt such musical memories.

Every guitarist who ever studied with Davis tells the same story about how he played secular material only after his strictly religious wife Annie had left the room. But playing secular song was about more than being “naughty” while the Missus had stepped away. Teaching allowed Davis to express all of who he was. A man of God there was no doubt, yet Davis could justify performing his earthier numbers under the guise of instruction. Just as he rarely sang blues when he performed that genre in public (see Chapter Six), he never taught the vocal lines or words to most secular songs in his
lessons, focusing instead on the guitar arrangements. While this might have been one of Davis’s moral loopholes, it both secured his legacy for generations of guitarists and gave Davis a way to integrate his whole life experience musically without backsliding from the core of his Christian faith and practice.

That we know much at all about this side of Davis is due largely to the many recordings, at home and in concert, that student Stefan Grossman made in the 1960s and has been releasing with frequency on various labels in the United States and England since the 1970s. As Grossman writes on Live at Gerde’s: “I was also friends with Manny Greenhill of Folklore Productions. He managed Rev. Davis and was encouraging me to record Rev. Davis whenever I could. Manny wanted me to get as many songs and instrumentals recorded so that they could be published and protected. . . . Rev. Davis was very much part of these recordings. He wanted to play tunes that he had not yet recorded.”

Davis himself intimated as much, directing on more than one occasion that Grossman and fellow student Ernie Hawkins, who also recorded Davis extensively, have the tape rolling. Sometimes this gave us the only known performance of a song by Davis, as in the fascinating house party number “Let’s Go Down to Betty’s” (discussed below). “I want you to catch this, Ernie,” he told Hawkins before launching into the song.

In looking over the canon of secular material, Grossman and Hawkins were the most important students to document – and, in Grossman’s case, make publicly available – Davis’s secular repertoire. Many of the songs were never recorded elsewhere and

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would have likely remained unknown had they not rolled tape in moments when Davis was feeling open and responsive to older “sinful” repertoire.

Of 104 different songs by Davis that Grossman has thus far released commercially (see Appendix 12), fifty-five are sacred – twenty-five uniquely so to these sessions, including four where Davis acted as accompanist to vocalist/family acquaintance Suzie Dew – and forty-nine secular. Of that latter number, eighteen are known only through these versions, with the overwhelming majority recorded in the private setting of a home or office. Grossman’s equal in the documentation of Davis’s repertoire, sacred and secular, is Hawkins, who recorded the guitar minister in the privacy of the student’s Pittsburgh apartment between 1968 and 1970. His efforts are largely unknown, however, since he has not issued any of this material commercially. Of seventy-eight songs recorded by Hawkins (see Appendix 13), there is a ratio almost two to one in favor of secular material – specifically, there are fifty secular songs, with twenty-three known essentially through these tapes, while twenty-eight are sacred with seven previously undocumented and/or unheard (two of the songs – “Don’t Move My Bed Till the Holy Ghost Come” and “Joy to Know Him” – show up as unissued titles for the Harlem Street Singer sessions, 5 but are fortunately preserved here). All of this makes Hawkins’s recordings as important as Grossman’s in revealing the repertoire and musical personality of Davis, and hopefully they too will be issued at some future date.

As with his sacred music, Davis did not appropriate secular song sources outright. Instead, his process was one of constant creative interjection and troping of the source material, whether he was revamping folk material with plenty of ragtime polish or

refiguring pop tunes into traditional song through the insertion of floating folk verse.

Take, for example, the 1912 Shelton Brooks hit “All Night Long,” a popular appropriation among traditional musicians (see, as well, a version on fiddle and guitar by Mississippi brothers Miles and Bob Pratcher that Alan Lomax recorded⁶). In Davis’s version, he shed the song’s sentimentality, retaining only the pre-chorus refrain for folk couplets of his own device that he used freely in other songs, notably “Come Down and See Me Sometime”:

“All Night Long”⁷

Well, I went down to my good gal’s house,
And I just couldn’t get in at all.
I begin to peep through the key crack,
I found another man was in my stall.
He was there all night long,
God knows, it’s all night long.

Well, [white] gal sleeps in a brass iron bed,
And a yellow girl sleeps in the same.
While a black gal, she makes a pallet down on the floor,
God, she’s sleeping just the same.
It’s all night long,
It’s all night long.

Well, a yellow gal she uses, uh, good smellin’ clothes,
And a brownskin do the same.
Black gal, she use a good sweet soap,
That’s good smellin’ just the same.
Oh, it’s all night long,
God knows, it’s all night long.

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⁶Miles Pratcher and Bob Pratcher, “All Night Long,” on Sounds of the South: A Musical Journey from the Georgia Sea Islands to the Mississippi Delta Recorded in the Field by Alan Lomax (Atlantic 7 82496-2, 1993); originally issued on Roots of the Blues (Atlantic 1348, 1960).

Frankly, such loose appropriation was the case with nearly every pre-composed song Davis touched. In his secular and sacred music alike, the commentary and expansion of established musical and prosodic structures by Davis allow a kind of entreaty through music that at once honored the past while (to borrow Henry Louis Gates’s term) signifyin(g) on it to mark Davis’s personalized ownership in the great body of African American song. Davis may not have been a jazz player but he could think like one, and his contributions to the so-called “emergent culture” of black America, i.e., the spinning of new meanings, perspectives, and experiences from older elements of the past, is profound as a result.8

TRADITIONAL MUSIC

In discussing context as it related to the music of Mississippi John Hurt, Steve Calt wrote that between 1900 and 1940, there were essentially four types of situations in which African Americans performed non-sacred music (i.e., blues, rags, and various pop tunes): 1) the household; 2) the street; 3) dance situations; and 4) the stage.9 Davis played all the above, maintaining house music (lessons, in particular), street performance, and staged concerts into the final decades of his life, and he performed much of his repertoire – sacred included – in just about any situation.

If context was malleable, even more so were the tunes, and calculating what of Davis’s music was traditional versus popular can be as futile as a cat chasing its tail. The

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guitarist, rural though he was, belonged to a generation that saw emerging folk and popular musical sources interact in unprecedented ways, and used both in equal measure, tailoring pop music to his folksy style and infusing folk music with popular inspiration. True, we find more traditional fare, songs such as “Get Along Cindy” and the fiddle standard “Soldier’s Joy”\textsuperscript{10} plus various banjo and harmonica tunes (see Chapter Seven), but we also find songs such as “Candy Man” and “Cocaine Blues” culled from the music of traveling revues such as medicine shows and circuses, where distinctions blurred much as they did on the vaudeville stage between folk and popular song, resulting in numbers as instantly catchy as they were difficult to classify.

Still, plenty of what Davis did had the stamp of regional traditions not to mention the pervasive expressive devices of traditional African American culture at large. He began playing professionally in a string band, after all – a sextet that included two guitars (he and Willie Walker), two violins, an upright bass, and a mandolin\textsuperscript{11} – that would have utilized, as any good band did, the common body of folk verse known to blacks and whites alike. In later years, Davis called on the folk verse of his youth in seemingly inexhaustible supply. More overt examples include the string of square dance verses he rattled off to student John Gibbon in the late 1950s, a sample of the kind of light folk verse he would have sung at dances and other such rural entertainment nearly half a century prior. One of these verses, in particular, was verbatim what Howard W. Odum had collected at the turn of the century in a version of “You Shall Be Free”:

\textsuperscript{10}Listed as “Guitar and Banjo Duet” in home recordings made by Al Matthes and released as \textit{Blind Gary Davis} (Document DLP 521, 1988).

I went down to hog-eye town,  
Dey sot me down to table;  
I et so much dat hog-eye grease,  
Till de grease run out my navel.  

Some fifty years later, Davis sang the very same to Gibbon:

Well, I went down to the hog-eyed town,  
And sut me down to the table.  
I ate so much of that hog-eyed meat,  
Till the grease run out of my navel.  

Musically, the accompanying pentatonic melody had the lilt, phrasing, and tempo of a typical dance tune, though the melody appears to be one of Davis’s own device.

Example 5.1. Reverend Gary Davis, third verse from a set of “Square Dance Verses” sung a cappella. CD track time 0:17-0:22. From Demons and Angels (Shanachie 6117, 2001).

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12 Howard W. Odum, “Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes (Concluded),” Journal of American Folklore 24, no. 94 (October-December 1911): 370.

In another song that began with the line “Rabbit and the baboon sitting in the sun,” Davis strung together a group of folk-imbued verses modeled in part on the familiar sagas of “The Monkey and the Baboon” and “Ole Aunt Dinah.” Compare, for instance, Davis’s line,

Old Aunt Dinah she’s sitting on a stump,
Up come a bumble bee and stung her on the rump.  

with one collected by Dorothy Scarborough that went

Ole Aunt Dinah went to town
Riding a billy-goat, leading a hound.
Hound barked, billy-goat jumped,
Set Aunt Dinah straddle of a stump. 

Yet another song he sang on occasion, “Little Boy, Little Boy Who Made Your Britches?” had direct lineage in Piedmont children’s rhymes. Intoned Davis in the title verse:

Little boy, little boy who made your britches?
Daddy cut ’em out and Mommy sewed your stitches. 

Compare that with an almost identical verse reported in Union County, North Carolina, by Frank C. Brown:

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16 Found commercially on Demons and Angels. Ernie Hawkins also documented an eight-minute version found on private tape 6, side B.
Little boy, little boy, who made your britches?
Ma cut ’em out and Pa sewed the stitches.\textsuperscript{17}

Of a type of children’s teasing rhymes called “catches” or “sells,” such verses existed “to cause a laugh at the expense of one of the players. This is usually accomplished by tricking him into saying something which will expose him to ridicule.”\textsuperscript{18} Davis added his own touches, however, not the least being lyrical ad-libs that took the song out of youthful territory into the morally ambiguous realm of the blues with observations on theft, drug use, sexual innuendo, and infidelity. Some sample couplets:

Gal went out there chinquapin huntin’.
I stuck my peg in and God knows she kept a-gruntin’.

She saw me with another gal, we was just a-goin’.
She grabbed her arms full of bricks and she started to throwin’.

I was in another house, sopped up some molasses.
My gal got a pole and started cuttin’ – .\textsuperscript{19}

As he once commented, rather ironically for a children’s rhyme, he chose to play it only after “all the women are gone.”\textsuperscript{20}

One of his staple numbers, “Sally, Where’d You Get Your Liquor From?” – likely a song with partial roots in medicine shows or the circus – extended further back to


\textsuperscript{19}First two couplets from performance of the song on Rev. Gary Davis, At Home and Church: 1962-1967 (Stefan Grossman’s Guitar Workshop 130/1/2, 2010); third couplet from Track 7 of a digital transfer of tape 6, side B, from private collection of Ernie Hawkins.

\textsuperscript{20}0:07-0:10 of Track 7 of tape 6, side B, Hawkins.
nineteenth-century minstrelsy with an introductory stanza known through generations as belonging to “Old Dan Tucker,” which Daniel Emmett and his Virginia Minstrels had brought to the popular stage in the 1840s. The verse in question being:

Old Dan Tucker was a fine old man.
Washed his face in a frying pan.
Combed his hair with a wagon wheel.
Died with the toothache in his heel.\(^{21}\)

Yet this verse didn’t exist in the first published versions and appears to have been added via oral transmission as the song entered folk tradition (where it may well have originated). Published versions, in fact, often had different verses and music even among themselves, with an open quality to the song’s structure that lent itself to further alteration in a folk context.\(^{22}\) By the time the Lomaxes documented it in the 1930s, hundreds of verses had been generated, and “Dan Tucker” had long been a reliable tune among black fiddlers at dances, where improvisatory verses, often of the bawdy variety, were created.\(^{23}\)

Contributing to the folk process in his own way, Davis consistently sang the verse “wrong,” as if to make a fantastic situation even more improbable:

\(^{21}\)Printed in White, American Negro Folk-Songs, 160.


Old man Peter was a mighty man,
Combed his head in a frying pan
Washed his face in a wagon wheel,
He died with a toothache in his heel.  

Since the song largely concerns drunken behavior, with Old Man Peter – the paramour to a certain boozer named Sally – replacing the character Old Dan Tucker, the above stanza could be seen in the light of said carousing (or in light of Davis’s own issues with women, particularly his first failed marriage). Explained Davis in one performance: “Now this gal, she met a man by the name of Peter. And it’s known that Peter could break any woman he got his hand on, but this here’s one gal he got a hold he couldn’t do a thing with, you understand. And when he died, this here’s the condolence they said over him, you know.” Then again, such a topsy turvy take on the verse could be interpreted as the obvious perversion of something that had already been perverted by the racist caricatures of white minstrelsy.

A more obvious example of a song with minstrel origins in Davis’s repertory was “Raise a Ruckus Tonight,” a number long favored by black and white performers, traditional and professional alike, including the Norfolk Jubilee Quartet (“Raise R-U-K-U-S Tonight,” Paramount 12035, 1923), the Birmingham Jubilee Singers (“Raise a Rukus To-Night,” Columbia 14263-D, 1927), Hugh Cross and Riley Puckett (“Gonna Raise Ruckus Tonight,” Columbia 15455-D, 1928), Roy Acuff (“Gonna Raise a Rukus Tonight,” ARC 7-01-60, 1936), and Cliff and Bill Carlisle (“Gonna Raise a Ruckus Tonight,” 1962).
Tonight,” Decca 5774, 1939), among many others. In later years, noteworthy versions came from Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, and Coyal McMah – on Get On Board: Negro Folksongs by the Folkmasters (Folkways Records FA 2028, 1952) – and Gus Cannon – on Walk Right In (Stax 702, 1963). It was described as “a slavery-time song” by African American traditional musician Brady “Doc” Barnes, and as “an ante-bellum Negro hoedown or jig tune with an overlay of minstrel influence,” by John A. and Alan Lomax, who explained the song’s appeal among black musicians, despite its minstrel trappings, as a result of coded implications. Depending on who was listening, “Raise a Ruckus Tonight” operated either as irony or protest, and thus became one of the very few secular numbers black churchgoers entertained at picnics and socials. Again, Davis added his own verses to the familiar chorus:

“Raise A Ruckus Tonight”

Chorus:
Won’t you come along, children, come along,  
Where the moon is shining bright.  
Jump on board, down the river float,  
Gonna raise a ruckus tonight.

Well, two little men black as tar –  
Raise a ruckus tonight –  
Tryin’ to get to heaven on a flat car –  
Raise a ruckus tonight.


29Reverend Gary Davis, “Raise a Ruckus Tonight,” At Home and Church.
Wheel jumped off and went to the ground –
Raise a ruckus tonight –
They quit saying, “Thank God, we’re heaven bound” –
Well, raise a ruckus tonight.

Well, the bullfrog jumped on pulpit stand –
Raise a ruckus tonight –
Well, he preached the gospel like a natchel man –
Raise a ruckus tonight.
Never seen so many join the church before –
Well, raise a ruckus tonight –
It’s nineteen thousand and fifty-four –
Raise a ruckus tonight.

Even his most folk-rooted performances had progressive elements as supplied by his guitar arrangements, the best example of which is “Buck Rag.” The buck dance is a solo-performed African American vernacular dance related, according to Kip Lornell, to a group of similar routines that include the “Shimmie-She-Wobble,” the “Black Bottom” and “Shim-Sham-Shimmie.” In medicine shows, the buck dance showed up alongside what Marshall and Jean Stearns called in Jazz Dance, a “crazy quilt blend of folk material such as shuffles, struts, hops, twists and grinds . . . The emphasis was on eccentric dancing, that is, highly individual and inventive movements following no set pattern, but rather exploring new ways of capturing attention.” Also known as flat-footing and “getting off the puppy’s tail,” buck dancing was among many such dances to emerge in the nineteenth century alongside the cakewalk. On the minstrel stage, it combined with

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the pigeon wing into buck and wing dancing, a form that was reinvigorated via black vaudeville through such figures as Katie Carter, “Queen of the Female Buck and Wing Dancers,” who helped introduce the dance as a popular form in 1893’s “South Before the War,” and later on by Bert Williams, whose 1916 catchphrase hit, “I’m Gone Before I Go,” was an up-tempo buck and wing dance number.

In contrast to the flight-like feet lifting of wing dancing, buck dancing was performed low to the ground, and in traditional music contexts, was often accompanied by a guitar, banjo, or sometimes harmonica. The musical setting typically included stops and breaks that left room for spontaneous flash and flourish from the dancer, although both participants – dancer and instrumentalist – might goad each other on to greater and greater syncopated heights. Performed in informal situations such as might be found at a country party or community gathering, the buck dance became, through its improvisatory moves, one way for poor, rural, black men to assert their individuality and counter the anonymity otherwise bestowed them. As one noted buck dancer, Quentin “Fris” Holloway, explained, buck dancing was blustery for a reason: “They wanted to be the center of attention, that’s what they wanted to be.”

The body of buck dance performances on guitar is highly personalized. Most are characterized by simple harmonies, a lively tempo, rhythmic stops, and percussive effects such as golpe (tapping the wood of the guitar) that imitate the improvised,

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rhythmic nature of the dance and/or suggest the kinds of spontaneous interaction a musician might have had with a buck dancer. Recordings are plenty and extend across the South from Texas to Virginia, including versions by Mississippi John Hurt, K. C. Douglas, Mance Lipscomb, Algia Mae Hinton, Lil’ Son Jackson, J. W. Jones, ones on harmonica by Sonny Terry and Sanford L. Collins, one on banjo by Hobart Smith, and Elizabeth Cotten, the Chapel Hill-born guitarist and banjo player whose rendition comes closest to resembling Davis’s (possibly a reflection of regional taste and style – Cotten and Davis shared several other songs including the ballad “Delia”).

Example 5.2. Elizabeth Cotten, “Buck Dance.” From Shake Sugaree (Smithsonian Folkways 40147, 2004). G-b = golpe behind the bridge. Cotten’s guitar is tuned approximately a half-step below standard.
Davis performed his buck dance numerous times in just about all settings, from the home to the studio to the stage, and while certain aspects such as his choice of key, use of golpe, syncopated stops, and ascending and descending chromatic activity are related to the buck dance as played by Cotten, similarities end there. Davis’s buck dance was often called “Buck Rag” for a reason. Unlike any other example in black folk music, Davis’s take on the folk form used the rich harmonic language of ragtime to accentuate the syncopation and stops of the dance into something that, to paraphrase buck dancer “Fris” Holloway, “wanted to be the center of attention.” Even in instrumental buck dances, the song is still all about the dance. In Davis’s case, this meant – through the application of heightened chromaticism, virtuosic delivery, and abundant percussive
effects – that the guitar became the dancer (and only Hobart Smith’s exhilarating buck dance on banjo, recorded by Alan Lomax in 1942, matches the athleticism of Davis’s showpiece). Davis would conclude most performances with a variety of percussive effects that engaged the guitar beyond the melodic to a staged presentation of rhythm and motion, as in the following example, where a combination of tambor, golpe (played both behind the bridge and on the neck toward the headstock), and hambone-like shuffling of the right and left hand palms, bring the performance to a heightened syncopated finale at once musical and visual. Worth noting is how he switched up his golpe attack prior to the hand shuffle by moving the percussive hit from behind the bridge to the neck near the headstock, which then put his hands in position for the subsequent palm-applied rhythm, a well-conceived delivery that sounds utterly spontaneous but took some pre-arranged planning to pull off smoothly.

36 Thanks to Sule Greg Wilson for thoughts on the buck dance; conversation with author, McDaniel College, Westminster, Maryland, 8 July 2008. Another song by Davis sometimes labeled “Buck Rag” is characteristic enough of the buck dance form, though it has few of the stable elements that defined the “Buck Rag” he usually played. Consequently, I differentiate between the two by deferring in the latter case to the title “Fast Fox Trot,” which is how Prestige listed it (including “Buck Rag” as subtitle) for 1964’s The Guitar & Banjo of Reverend Gary Davis. For Hobart Smith’s “Buck Dance,” see Hobart Smith, Blue Ridge Legacy – The Alan Lomax Collection: Portraits (Rounder 11661-1799-2, 2001).
Example 5.4. Reverend Gary Davis, “Buck Dance.” Track time is 1:02:16-21 into Rev. Gary Davis: The Video Collection (Rounder/Vestapol Productions 13111, 2008). Performance is from a 1967 Seattle Folklore Society film. G-b = a non-pitched golpe hit by the right hand on the wood of the guitar behind the bridge; G-n = a non-pitched golpe hit by the right hand on the neck of the guitar toward the headstock.

One of the more notable (if essentially unknown) songs by Davis that injected personal and popular style into his folk material was “Let’s Go Down to Betty’s,” which described with jocular humor a rural house party at the turn of the century back when Davis played such settings. Among his unissued performances, the song – performed in the key of C – is a four-bar pentatonic melody with an AA stanza structure that suggests in some ways a proto-blues form. Yet the tune is musically more ragtime than blues and lyrically more narrative than personal, though Davis placed himself in the action as one of the revelers, an eyewitness to the evening’s events which end with the husband unexpectedly returning home, a subsequent near-riot, police arriving, and children wailing in comment. Davis admitted to experiencing as much, stating to Stefan Grossman about the dances he played, “Sometimes people get drunk and get fightin’ and shootin’. All like that happened. I would stop playing and find somewhere to go when that happened because you know me and bullets don’t set horses.”

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37Stefan Grossman, Rev. Gary Davis/Blues, 8.
account (somewhat apocryphal, I suspect, given its punch line) to more than one student, telling Allan Evans, “Then there was a time I was playing at a party, wearing a white suit when a fight broke out, people hittin’ and stabbin’ each other, using knives and pistols you understand, so I reached for a pie and hid up a chimney nearby. When I got out, the fightin’ was done, everybody was gone, my pie eaten, and my white suit black!” When fellow student Alex Shoumatoff heard the same account, Annie Davis retorted to her husband, “Aw come on, B. Davis. You still trying to tell people that old story?”

“Let’s Go Down to Betty’s” lived up to such observations, humor included. It was one of Davis’s most visually pregnant songs, full of descriptive and dramatic details that make it as perfect a snapshot of a time and place as, say, Chuck Berry’s “School Day” or the Beach Boys’ “Fun Fun Fun.” As Davis explained when he performed it to a group of people at Ernie Hawkins’s apartment: “This woman always have a good time after her husband have two or three weeks vacation, and he’ll go off and take a trip. He come back and caught her this time, you understand. He didn’t tell her when he was comin’ back. Everybody loved to flop down to his house. This girl, her name was Betty. She always give the boys and girls a good time when her husband had a longtime vacation, you understand, taking a trip. You buy liquor, you understand, and have a good time. And everything was goin’ on, so you know how it was.”

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40 From Tape 3, Side B of Ernie Hawkins’ private tapes, recorded circa 1968-1970, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, at Hawkins’s apartment. Time is 0:33-1:12 on track 8 of a digitally-dubbed copy of the tape.
“Let’s Go Down to Betty’s”

[Guitar intro/break (each statement on theme) x 2]

[Guitar break 3] (Spoken: Boys, I say where the, where’s the ball gonna be at now? I’ll let you know!)

[Guitar breaks 4 & 5]

Let’s go down to Betty’s, good God-a-mighty,
Let’s us go down to Betty’s, hmm, hmm.

Let’s go down to Betty’s, great God,
Let’s go down to Betty’s.

She got a ham on a-bakin’, good God-a-mighty,
She got a ham on a-bakin’.

Well, she got some liquor, God-a-mighty,
Well, she got some liquor.

Let’s us find some women, good God,
Let’s us find some women.

[Guitar break 1]

[Guitar break 2] (Spoken: Well, they carved the house out, you know.)

[Guitar break 3]

Said the piano’s a-playin’, good God-a-mighty,
Said the piano’s a-playin’.

Let’s go down to Betty’s, good Lord,
Let’s go down to Betty’s.

She got a barbecue a-cookin’, God-a-mighty,
Got a barbecue a-cookin’.

Well, she killed a big turkey, good God-a-mighty,
(Spoken: You know, that why’s some fellows goin’ down there.)

[Guitar break x 2]

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41From Tape 3, Side B of Ernie Hawkins’ private tapes. Time is 1:24-6:27 into track 8 of a digitally-dubbed copy of the tape.
Well, the people got to dancin’, good God-a-mighty,
Well, the people got to dancin’.

Well, they drinks up all the liquor, good God-a-mighty.
[Guitar answers]

Well, they eat up all the turkey, good God-a-mighty.
[Guitar answers]

Her husband slipped in on her.
(Spoken: Good God, boy, you see what’s happenin’?)

He pulled out a pistol, you know, boy.
[Guitar answers]

Well, he start to shootin’ (spoken aside: hold that), God,
He start to shootin’, yeah.

Said the people start to runnin, good God-a-mighty,
Some the people start to runnin’.

Some jumped out the window.
(Spoken: Good God, that was a time, you know!)

Some run in the kitchen, good God-a-mighty,
Some run in the kitchen.

Some run in, in the closet, good God-a-mighty.
[Guitar answers]

(Spoken: Said the house was clean, boys, in a few minutes, you know.)

[Guitar break]

Some went cross the field, good God-a-mighty,
Some run cross the field.

Some jumped in the river, good God-a-mighty,
Some jumped in the river.

Some liked to got drowned, good God a-mighty,
Some liked to got drowned.

[Guitar break]
Him and his wife got to fightin’, good God-a-mighty,
Him and his wife got to fightin’.

Police come down to ‘rest him, good God-a-mighty,
Police come down to ‘rest him.

Said they waked up all the children, good God-a-mighty,
Well, they waked up all the children.

Said the children start to hollerin’, good God-a-mighty,
The children start hollerin’.

[Guitar break to end]

To those words, Davis sang a simple pentatonic melody in a manner consistent
with most of his secular material, i.e., as a half-sung, half-spoken kind of folk
sprechstimme.

Example 5.5. Reverend Gary Davis, vocal line to “Let’s Go Down to Betty’s,” sung a cappella for
first verse. Track time is 2:06-2:14 into track 8 of a digitally-transferred copy of Tape 3, Side B,
Hawkins’s apartment. Note: the pitch is a step above the original.

Musically, Davis spiced things up with harmonies that were hardly traditional, a
circular type progression which introduced both the relative minor vi and the bVI all in
the course of a four-bar phrase. The phrase ends with an unlikely resolution of a first inversion bVI to the tonic, the C acting as something of a common tone.

![Guitar Example](image)

**Example 5.6.** Reverend Gary Davis, guitar part to “Let’s Go Down to Betty’s.” Track time is 2:44-2:51 into track 8 of a digitally transferred copy of Tape 3, Side B of Ernie Hawkins’ private tapes, recorded ca. 1968-1970, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, at Hawkins’s apartment. Note: Davis played the song on a twelve-string guitar tuned a step low. The actual chord formations are therefore in the key of C and not B-flat (hence the transcription in C). Also, the unison and octave courses of the twelve-string have not been included on the staff as they would only confuse the matter.

What’s more, Davis even squeezed in some inner voice movement with a section of contrary, chromatic motion that adds to the harmonic richness.

![Guitar Example](image)

**Example 5.7.** Reverend Gary Davis, “Let’s Go Down to Betty’s.” Inner chromatic line.

The bVI chord functioned here in an interesting way for Davis. Harmonically, it resolves up from E-flat to E-natural, though it can also be thought to resolve down melodically from E-flat to C, in what becomes a peculiar reconciliation of the neutral third of the blues scale both horizontally as tonal inflection and vertically as chordal...
gesture, and we might look at another example by Davis for a similar application. In his better-known number, “Children of Zion,” Davis also uses the bVI as a way to integrate the forceful E-flat of the melody into the song’s harmonic bed, a tonal nexus that operated between A minor and C major. In this case, the song’s E-flat acts as a flat fifth, an archaic-sounding melodic interjection that supported Davis’s oft-said comment that the ring-shout-like number was already old when he learned it from his grandmother. Davis used the same logic as in “Let’s Go Down to Betty’s” to harmonize the odd note within an A-flat chord, which resolves in m. 4 below to A minor, a highly unusual and wonderful gesture that made perfect sense in the harmonic sound world of a highly unusual and wonderful guitarist.


Davis injected plenty of folk sentiment and shared verse into popular tunes of the day. This allowed him to develop songs and performances at length from mere fragments of material, taking the essence of a composition without needing to learn it verbatim, yet
adding to it in a way that would have satisfied the requests of street patrons ready to
dispense a tip. Truth is, he did this time and again, plucking verse after endless verse
from the great body of black folklore, the workings of a master storyteller who could
proselytize, provoke, or pun at the mercurial drop of a hat.

Floating verse, in fact, shows up in many, if not most, of Davis’s songs, especially
his secular material. His rendition of “Rocking Chair Blues” is one such example. A
number of songs with that title were recorded in the 1920s by Bessie Smith, the Dixieland
Jug Blowers, and others, with one element common to all: a central “rocking chair”
stanza borrowed from black folk verse, as in Smith’s version:

I’m going to the river carrying a brand new rocking chair;
I’m going to the river carrying a brand new rocking chair.
I’m gonna ask Mister Tadpole to move all his stuff from here.  

Davis’s version, an eight-bar blues with an aa rhyme scheme, also calls on the
“rocking chair” idea as one of three floating verses. Sang the reverend:

Well, I’m goin’ down to the river, gonna sit in a rockin’ chair.
Gonna take no tit for tat, gonna rock away from here.

His only known performance of the song – captured at an informal party in the
late 1960s and possibly improvised on the spot – organized the verses into a composition
that commented directly on the friendly gathering and its every shifting atmosphere.

Holding court yet oddly aloof, Davis had just finished a run-through of “Baby, Let Me
Lay It on You,” which he introduced as a song about the “begging man.” Perhaps sensing
he was losing the attention of the revelers, one of whom wanted to start singing herself

and had implored Davis to get down to the “nitty gritty,” he next broke into a spontaneous eight-bar blues characterized by a minor v chord, which, due to its flat-seventh scale degree, stole the harmonic progression of its chance for full resolution; the tonic-dominant relationship became, in effect, as vague and unresolved as the musings of the singer’s melancholic mind.

![Guitar sheet music]


After this instrumental introduction, Davis then began singing, addressing the crowd in a way that was at once personal catharsis and brilliant theater. The words proceed in self-pitying tones with the image of Davis in his rocking chair, threatening to “rock away from here,” then to “put my head on the railroad line,” though he promises by song’s end – at which point he had regained everyone’s attention – to “get drunk” and
“tell every doggone thing I know.” And here, Davis reminded listeners of the power of blues to personalize any situation through the careful ordering and presentation of such stock verse. Bessie Smith and others sang similar lines, but at that moment, the song belonged to Davis.

Other songs in Davis’s repertory alluded to popular hits seemingly in name only, the frame of a familiar chorus or hook upon which Davis built his own lyrical and musical invention. He did this in his aforementioned take on the Shelton Brooks hit “All Night Long” (something Mississippi John Hurt also referenced vaguely in his same-named tune) and in live favorites such as “Talk on the Corner” – a.k.a., “She’s Funny That Way” and “She Just Put It That Way” – which he admittedly modeled after the 1928 tune, “She’s Funny That Way,” by one of his professed favorites, Roaring Twenties crooner Gene Austin. Davis’s ability to reassemble a pop hit found few better settings than “Come Down and See Me Sometime,” which was patterned loosely after the vaudeville hit, “Come After Breakfast (Bring Along Your Lunch, Leave ‘Fore Supper Time)”.

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43 Reverend Gary Davis, “Rocking Chair Blues,” from a private tape (identified in appendices as CD 5., Gary Davis at Rowena Reik’s, Pontiac, Michigan, c. 1969), track time 40:00-43:55.

44 Richard Noblett, Stephen Rye, and John Offord. “The Reverend Gary Davis” Blues Unlimited 25 (September 1965): 11. Davis wasn’t alone in appropriating ideas shared by the Austin hit, which was covered by a number of musicians from Emmett Miller to Billie Holiday. Blind Boy Fuller also worked a comparable verse into at least two songs: “Jivin’ Woman Blues” and his 1936 version of “(I Got a Woman Crazy for Me) She’s Funny That Way” (which shares no music and scant lyrical material with Davis’s tune save for an opening verse). Then again, the Charles Daniels/Richard Whiting composition that Austin debuted quite likely plucked familiar verse for its suave refrain, not the first nor last time vaudeville looked to folk idiom for inspiration.

Written by James Tim Brymn, Chris Smith, and James Burris, the song was initially featured by S.F. Dudley and his Northern Smart Set in the 1909-1910 musical comedy, “His Honor, the Barber.” It became the show’s breakout hit and quickly found its way into other revues including Allen’s New Orleans Minstrels and A Rabbit’s Foot Comedy Company (a.k.a., Rabbit’s Foot Minstrels). It proved so durable a hit, it was still being renewed into the 1930s.

Other than the same jocular refrain, Davis’s rendition – verse, chorus and melody – is different from the vaudeville tune, suggesting a folk or minstrel strain as common origin here as well. This thought is reinforced by another traditional music version of the song, the string band adaptation “Come Over and See Me Sometime” by the Georgia Yellow Hammers (Victor V-40091, 1928), which shares the same refrain and melodic content as Davis’s, though Davis’s verses are different, coming as they do from the African American side of folklore.

Davis’s is worth noting for its lyrical fecundity. Several performances ran to eighteen stanzas in which the Piedmont musician – nothing short of a living repository of black folk verse – addressed with subversive wit a number of concerns, not the least being class and race distinction. It was also among Davis’s most reliable sing-alongs in

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48A traditional version collected in 1980 in North Carolina is similar as well, found on Far in the Mountains: Vols. 3 & 4 (Musical Traditions MTCD 323-4, 2002) and likely taken from the Georgia Yellow Hammers version; see entry 4947 in the Roud Folksong Index.
concert, the collective folk spirit engaged through humor and homily. One such set-up went as follows:

I want you all to listen at me, give me an answer. There come time you like to have company, ain’t that right? And there come time you wish people would have stayed home, too, ain’t that right? Huh? I bet that happen more constantly too than when you would love to have company, too, ain’t that right? Sometime people wait till you get your dinner on table, or breakfast, or what it is, leave their house, sit down, and eat you out, and got more to eat than you got, ain’t that right? Somebody always got a window open leads right to your kitchen, watching you when you open your kitchen door, you understand? First thing you see ’em with their nose turned up smelling your coffee. Come on. Next time you look at your old man, you say, “Why don’t you tell them folks to stay home?” He say, “You, you tell ’em.” Well, you don’t know when you may have to need a person again, you understand. You can’t just tell a person to stay away from your house. Though you wish to God they would, though sometimes. No use telling about how to do it. I’m here to tell you, sing it to ’em, you understand? Go through the house and sing it to ’em. Now you don’t know what to sing, and I’m here to tell you. I want you all to repeat right behind me. Are you ready? All right. Come on, repeat this:

Come down to see me sometime. [Audience: Come down to see me sometime.] Say that as mean as you can!

Come down to see me sometime. [Audience: Come down to see me sometime.] Eat your breakfast ’fore you come. [Audience: Eat your breakfast ’fore you come.]

And bring your dinner in your hand. [Audience: Bring your dinner in your hand.] And get out before suppertime. [Audience: And get out before suppertime.]

Now you tell me what that means – you don’t want to give them nary, not nary, not nary a bite, ain’t that right?  

The stanzas he then sang were as follows (and here, like other performances of the song, he structured stanzas into related sub-groups, exhausting a motif, idea, or particular “rascal,” as Davis would say, before moving on. The sing-along chorus, which came after each stanza, has been omitted here).

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49Reverend Gary Davis, “Come Down to See Me Sometime.” Track time 1:00-3:03. Unissued track on Gary Davis at Buck’s Rock, 8-12-70 (FT-4696 LC) from the “Bob Carlin Collection 1824-2003” (call #20050), Southern Folklife Collection, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
1. My mama she give me two cents, my father give me three.
Met a pretty little girl one day, I just wanted her to marry me.

2. I went down to Nappy’s house, Nappy was gone to bed.
Hugged and kissed his pretty little wife, and that killed ol’ Nappy dead.
(Spoken: He had a heart attack.)

3. Well, the jaybird died with the whooping cough, sparrow died with the colic.
Here come the tadpole with a fiddle on his back, well, he’s goin’ on down to the frolic.

4. My father he had a ol’ gray horse, it was old sure as you’re born.
If a doggone jaw tooth was in his head, it’d yield five barrels of corn.
(Spoken: Here’s a grand rascal.)

5. Brother Rabbit come to my house, thought he just come to see me.
When I come to find out that grand rascal tried to ’suade my wife to leave me.
(Spoken: I wouldn’t let him know I know what it was all about, you know. I sent for him. He come back again.)

6. Brother Rabbit come to my house, I treated Brother Rabbit well.
I got me a choke-barreled shotgun, and I give Brother Rabbit hell.

7. I would not marry a goodtime gal, I tell you the reason why.
She be slippin’ and sittin’ in another man’s lap and telling her husband lies.

8. Now, a yellow girl sleeps in a brass iron bed, and a brown skin she does the same.
Black gal she build a bunk up side the wall, that’s sleepin’ just the same.

9. Well, a yellow girl eat this porterhouse steak, brown skin she does the same.
Black gal get collard greens, that’s eatin’ just the same.

10. Well, a yellow girl drink this high-priced gin, brown skin she does the same.
Black gal get a quart of this ol’ Sneaky Pete, that’s gettin’ drunk just the same.

11. Well, a yellow girl rides in a limousine car, brown skin she does the same.
Black gal gets this ol’ wagon and mule, that’s riding just the same.

12. Well, a yellow girl use this here white toilet soap, brown skin do the same.
Black gal use this ol’ Red Devil lye soap, that’s keepin’ clean just the same.
(Spoken: You know, my mother told me when I got twenty-one years old, said, “Now you behave yourself, don’t you run around and get hurt – and now you set free.” I began to feel my Cheerios, I didn’t pay no attention to what mama said, you understand. You know, that’s just what happened to many children, you understand. I felt I was a man, [could] do what I to do.)

13. Met a little girl comin’ up the street one day. I said, “Sugar, won’t you be my wife?” Her boyfriend come up with a Winchester rifle, tried to run me out all of my life.

(Spoken: Done got my toes sore, and I had to stay home about a month. I got well.)

14. Dinah come down the street eatin’ candy one day. I said, “Sugar, won’t you give me some?” I reached out my hand to break off a piece, and she bit off all of my thumb.

(Spoken: That thumb got well, I still wouldn’t behave myself.)

15. I was goin’ downtown one day in my car and met Dinah. She said, “Sugar, won’t you take me to ride?” I got out like a gentle man to lift her in. I got a .38 in my side.

(Spoken: I kept on pullin’ that Dinah, you understand. That’s what a man do, pull out something until he get himself killed.)

16. Went down to Dinah’s house one night, she done stripped off and gone to bed. I pulled off all I had on me to get in there with her, I got a bed slat side of my head.

(Spoken: I got well and wouldn’t behave myself.)

17. Dinah come down the street lookin’ so nice and good, I just wanted to kiss her lips. Reached out my arm to pull her in to me, I got a switchblade in my hip.

(Spoken: I got a chance to take Dinah out, you understand, after I done got all hurt up. So, I just get me a date, you know.)

18. Takin’ Dinah down to the bar one night, didn’t have nothin’ to give her. She out with a switchblade pocketknife, tried to take out all of my liver.

And in another performance, he added the following among ten sung stanzas:
1b. Well, the jaybird up the sugar tree, sparrow’s on the ground. 
Jaybird shook the sugar down while the sparrow passed it around.

2b. Well, the rich man went to the college, and the poor man went to the field. 
And the rich man shook his money sack higher than the poor man shook his heel.

3b. Well, a yellow girl use this high perfume, brown skin do the same. 
Black girl she get a nice sweet set of smokes – soap that scented – it’s good just the same.

4b. I had a little bag, and it was gold, all the string was twine. 
All the songs that I used to sing, “I wish that girl was mine”. 50

Variants of all the above stanzas were well documented by folklorists earlier in the twentieth century, including Howard Odum, Dorothy Scarborough, the Lomaxes, Newman Ivey White, Frank C. Brown, and Robert Duncan Bass. The latter three scholars especially, in their cataloging of North and South Carolina folklore, show without a doubt that Davis drew many of his lyrical turns of phrase from Piedmont tradition and regional permutation of popular minstrelsy. Among the distinct stanza types to be found in Davis’s take on the tune: what White called the “I wouldn’t marry” stanza as in verse 7; anecdotes of absurdly violent rejection and cuckholdry as in verses 13-18 and “Nappy”’s appearance in verse 2; the play-party-esque “Wish that girl was mine” line of 4b; the many animal references of verses 3-6 and 1b; and the comparison motif as in verses 3, 8-12 and 1b-3b. 51 Davis used this latter construct in a variety of ways, from contrastive metaphors involving animals (the jaybird, sparrow, and tadpole) and women (yellow, brown, black) to more overt disparities of rich and poor or, in one case, race (sang Davis


51For examples of these stanza types, see White, American Negro Folk-Songs, 316-21, 323-24, 334; and Belden and Hudson, ed., The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore, Vol. Three, 31, 121-22, 170-72, 201-03, 206-09, 353-54, 544-47.
in a live 1962 performance of the tune at Gerde’s Folk City: “Tell me the white man he went to the college, while the negro he went to the field/And the white man shook his big money sack, God all-mighty, how the negro shook his heel.”52 One of most common rhymes in all of African American secular song, the comparison motif, observed White, was typically a threefold statement and could trace its roots in part to nineteenth-century minstrel books and comparisons among, for example, the raccoon, possum, and rabbit, as in “Do Come Along, Ole Sandy Boy” and “The Old Cow Died,” both from Negro Singers’ Own Book c. 1846.53 This didn’t lessen the potent commentary – social and personal – Davis was able to provide through such stock devices. The jaybird, for example, existed within black vernacular culture as a metaphor for confidence and impudence,54 an applicable choice for Davis here, given the bird’s placement in a song defined for the most part by the singer’s cheeky advances. As always, how Davis assembled the above body of verse into performances that both entertained and elucidated underlying issues gave even his secular music a deeply philosophical if not spiritual underpinning in many cases, the preacher doling out hard-earned advice about a world he had to laugh at lest he cry.

Perhaps the most well-known song from Davis’s oeuvre to sum up his abilities at fusing the traditional with the popular was his take on “Hesitation Blues,” itself a good


53 See White, American Negro Folk-Songs, 316-17, and Bass, “Negro Songs from the Pedee Country,” 425. Bass also felt that jaybird references derived from minstrelsy, 429.

example of a song that crisscrossed between folk and popular usage for the better part of the last century. Wildly popular in its day, it was recorded by a range of acts from marching bands and vaudeville singers to a number of folk blues performers including Jim Jackson, Sam Collins, DeFord Bailey, and Lead Belly. The song arrived on the vaudeville circuit by at least 1913, and in sheet music with competing credits in 1915: “The Hesitation Blues” by St. Louis, Missouri, native Billy Smythe along with his brother-in-law Scott Middleton and Art “Whispering Pianist” Gillham (whose contribution wasn’t recognized until a 1926 reprint), and, more famously, “The Hesitating Blues” by W. C. Handy, which famed song collector Newman Ivey White dubbed a “modern” version of the song, suggesting the long process it took traveling from the folk underground to the commercial stage. A number of classic blues singers added the Handy version of the song to their stage and tent shows, including Bessie Smith, who by early 1916 was getting up to four encores a night with her interpretations of “Hesitating Blues” and “St. Louis Blues.” Jelly Roll Morton also claimed authorship in an interview from 1938, at which point the song had fully entered the repertories of black and white musicians alike from jazz to country music.


56White, American Negro Folk-Songs, 391.

57Abbott and Seroff, Ragged but Right, 299. Lizzie Miles also created quite a sensation with her version. In one show at an Indiana state prison it was noted that “When Mrs. Miles sang the ‘Hesitating Blues’ the riot commenced”; see Ragged but Right, 401n62.

Davis’s rendition is based on neither Smythe/Middleton nor Handy but is certainly the result of other if not older influences – he claimed to have learned it around 1916 when “a fella come through jiggin’ it on the piano.”

59 Lead Belly recalled hearing the song in the years leading up to 1910, which would predate any copyrighted versions, and Handy himself in all likelihood lifted the tune’s familiar refrain from folk verse.

60 Abbe Niles wrote in Handy’s 1926 landmark, *Blues: An Anthology* (the first published collection of blues songs), that the composer initially heard the song sung and played “by a wandering musician who said he had it from a hymn (yet unidentified) and suggested its use.”

61 The fact that the tune also showed up in the sanctified song tradition – notably as “Denomination Blues” by Washington Phillips in 1927 and “That’s All” by Sister Rosetta Tharpe in the early 1940s – lends credence to the idea that “Hesitation Blues” had at least partial roots in gospel song.

The song’s refrain – sung in Handy’s version as “Tell me how long will I have to wait? Oh, won’t you tell me now, why do you hesitate?” – is the core lyrical element common to all versions of the song, Davis’s included, and shows up in variants collected in, among other places, North and South Carolina and Alabama.

64 In addition, musical

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64 See, for example, White, *American Negro Folk-Songs*, 391, 398; and Bass, “Negro Songs from the Pedee Country,” 421-22. The “how long” refrain was also appropriated in other folk songs; see White, 391.
identifiers common to all versions are its twelve-bar format, general melodic contour, and the trademark major-sixth neighbor tone that begins each phrase of the verse. Other than that, renditions can vary, none more so, perhaps, than Davis’s, which is the only one to have set the song in a minor key. Using the relative minor as a substitute for the song’s typical major tonality, he shifts to the relative major after the first four bars via a chromatic chord modulation similar to Blind Blake’s “Rope Stretching Blues” – both songs start in A minor, establish a strong emphasis of the dominant of that key (E), then introduce a dominant C7 that resolves to the F chord, which acts as something of a pivot chord (bVI in A minor, IV in C) by which both Davis and Blake move in and out of two related tonal centers.

Example 5.10. Reverend Gary Davis, “Hesitation Blues.” Track time 0:01-0:20. Taken from Pure Religion and Bad Company (Smithsonian/Folkways Records SF 40035, 1991). Note: the tempo listed is that of the performance as preserved, which was sped up at some point in the
recording/editing process – indeed, Davis’s guitar is a half-step sharp on this and other songs on the album.


Davis:  | Am: i / V / i / V / i / V / V7/VI / |
        | IV / IV / I / I / |
        | V7 / I / V7 / I6 vi V7 / I6 / V / |

Blake:  | Am: i / i / V / i / i V / VI V / VI / |
       | C: V / IV V / IV |
        | IV / IV / I / V7 / I / I / |
        | V7 / V / V7 / I / IV / I / V / |
But a version of “Hesitation Blues” collected by Frank C. Brown brings Davis’s arrangement, musically at least, back to regional Piedmont tradition. Collected in 1919 as “I Got De Hezotation Stockings and De Hezotation Shoes” by Blake B. Harrison, an informant from Durham, the melody’s heightened chromaticism marks the likely influence of vaudeville, as Schnihan states, but also emphasizes the relative minor at the outset thanks to its raised fifth scale degree, a regional turn of phrase, perhaps, and if so, one that Davis would have easily harmonized by simply starting in the relative minor as a substitute chord for the tonic before falling back into the major lilt of every other performance.


Lyrically, Davis’s performances share a good deal with 1929’s “Voice Thowin’ Blues” by Walter “Buddy Boy” Hawkins and the 1936 side, “All Around Man,” by Mississippi risqué blues king Bo Carter (real name, Armenter “Bo” Chatmon). Both the
Carter tune and Hawkins’s novelty number – a thinly-veiled version of “Hesitation Blues” with the gimmick of voice-throwing tossed in for good measure – include verses built from father-and-son occupational double entendres that play up the image of the sexual “handy man” (one such verse – “I ain’t no doctor, but the doctor’s son” – also appeared in Charlie Poole’s adaptation, “If the River Was Whiskey”65). In the case of Carter, the entire song was structured around the ribald concept, capped each time by the refrain, “‘Cause I’m a all-around man, oh, I’m a all-around man/I’m a all-around man, I can do most anything that come my hand”:

Now I ain’t no butcher, no butcher’s son,
I can do your cuttin’ till the butcher man comes.

Now I ain’t no plumber, no plumber’s son,
I can do your screwin’ till the plumber man comes.

Now I ain’t no miller, no miller’s son,
I can do your grindin’ till the miller man comes.

Now I ain’t no milkman, no milkman’s son,
I can pull your titties till the milkman comes.

Now I ain’t no spring-man, no spring-man’s son,
I can bounce your springs till the spring-man comes.

Now I ain’t no auger-man, no auger-man’s son,
I can bore your hole till the auger-man comes.66

Hawkins had two such verses to offer:

I ain’t no doctor, doctor’s son,

65Charlie Poole with the North Carolina Ramblers, “If the River Was Whiskey” (Columbia 15545-D, 1930).

Ease your pain till your doctor come.

and

I ain’t no miller, miller’s son,
Can be your miller till your man done come.67

Both songs may have shaped Davis’s version, which shared in essence three of Carter’s six stanzas and the above two stanzas by Hawkins. At the same time, the East Coast-based Davis sang nearly twenty such verses in his many performances of the song, including back-breaker, boiler, bookkeeper, chauffeur, coal digger, cradle rocker, digger, doctor, ginner, good boy, good man, grocery man, milkman, miller, plumber, preacher, rent payer, well digger, and wine presser. Such commonality, then, just as likely reflected the diffusive nature of black folk verse, especially when it adhered to popular song, and such occupational couplets were collected, for example, in South Carolina and Alabama.68

The levels to which Davis could call on his knowledge of folk verse made “Hesitation Blues” one of the most accomplished examples of lyrical invention in all of his oeuvre. Under the right environment, he could extend the song well past ten minutes, stringing more than two-dozen stanzas together in a performance bursting with earthy, risqué humor. It could achieve a level of bawdiness unmatched in his repertoire, and he seemed to have taken glee in eliciting chuckles and laughs – the more uncomfortable the better – from such material. Nine performances by Davis of the song were documented


from 1957 to 1971, in which he generated nearly fifty different verses. A look at the five performances in which he included words reveals a lyrical stability in the first half-dozen stanzas or so, which tended to be the same. This, however, gave way, if the mood hit him, to increased lyrical surprise and sexuality.\textsuperscript{69} Aided by the rapt attention of a female listener, Davis capped one thirteen-and-a-half minute performance at a private party by intoning the rather un-preacher-like:

\begin{quote}
If the bed break down, let’s finish on the floor;  
If the floorboard’s out, let’s finish on the ground.\textsuperscript{70}
\end{quote}

Other common lines timed for hilarity included:

\begin{quote}
Well, I ain’t never been to heaven but I’ve been told,  
They said Saint Peter learned the angels how to do the jelly roll,  
and

Well, I ain’t no wine presser, ain’t no wine presser’s son,  
But I can mash out a little juice till the wine presser comes.
\end{quote}

Most shocking were couplets Davis sang in front of Grossman that took the student more than forty years to finally release:

\begin{quote}
Corn in the crib and it’s got to be shucked.  
But the women in the bed, I swear, they got to be fucked.

If you want to be a man, be a man in full.  
Let your nuts hang down just like a Jersey bull.\textsuperscript{71}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{69}Such innuendo, wit and lyrical spontaneity seem to have been part of the song’s challenge for a performer and expectation by an audience – Jelly Roll Morton’s version undergoes similar lyrical exposition; see \textit{The Complete Library of Congress Recordings by Alan Lomax} (Rounder 1888, 2005).

\textsuperscript{70}Found on private CD 5, Gary Davis at Rowena Reik’s, Pontiac, Michigan, c. 1969, 13:28-26:55.

\textsuperscript{71}Reverend Gary Davis, “Hesitation Blues,” \textit{At Home and Church}.  

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Davis claimed he had never heard of W. C. Handy, though the two performed at the same Town Hall memorial to Lead Belly 28 January 1950.\textsuperscript{72} Even if Davis didn’t recognize with whom he had shared the stage, the 78-loving guitarist would have certainly known the Handy-associated song via its many hit versions beginning with that by vaudeville star Al Bernard in 1919 (Edison 3738). Given the song’s instant recognition, “Hesitation Blues” served as a number he could count on to entertain folks both on the street and in the country milieu of house parties, fish fries, and other such social gatherings, honing in the process the witty two-liners and endless reservoir of floating verse which he brought to the song. That “Hesitation Blues” continued to work its magic in the 1960s on young people now separated by generations from any contextual source spoke foremost to the time-honored charms of the song (“I believe, Lordy, mama, got the psycho-delic blues,” sang the Holy Modal Rounders in their 1964 update of the aforementioned Charlie Poole version\textsuperscript{73}), but also to Davis’s abilities to captivate a crowd. His rendition, after all, cast its own influential net, and acts such as Janis Joplin, Hot Tuna, Dave van Ronk, and Ralph McTell all played “Hesitation Blues” with Davis’s minor-intoned arrangement as the blueprint.

RAGTIME

Despite being known as a ragtime guitarist, little of what Davis played – some seven documented tunes – was actually ragtime in the structural sense. Rather, he infused


\textsuperscript{73}“Hesitation Blues” on The Holy Modal Rounders (Prestige P-7720, 1964).
much of what he played with elements indebted to ragtime, from adventurous harmonies
to “ragged” melodic and rhythmic syncopation. Unlike his Piedmont peers, however,
Davis looked to both folk rags – that is, a single theme with variations built from the
circle of fifths – and classic rags for inspiration, and several of his signature tunes were
ragtime in the truer sense.

Blind Boy Fuller, by comparison, recorded more rags than Davis – starting with
1935’s “Rag Mama Rag,” on which Davis played second guitar. But Fuller’s rags were
almost exclusively of the folk variety or through the use of rag turnarounds (a circle-of-
fifths rush to the cadence) imbedded within blues and popular tunes. Davis played this
type as well, notably a signature instrumental he tended to refer to as “Twelve Sticks” –
also labeled variously as “I Didn’t Want to Join That Band,” “The Boy Was Kissing the
Girl,” and “The Boy Was Kissing the Girl (and Playing the Guitar at the Same Time).”

In folk rags, also referred to as blues rags, the structure is simply repetition of a
partial circle of fifths, which act as a harmonic ground over which variations could be
played. Typically, a statement would be either eight or sixteen bars in length, starting on
the V7/ii, moving to the V7/V, then V7 and finally resolving to the tonic. For folk blues
guitarists, this progression proved extremely useful in the two keys where all four chords
could be played in open position – G and C – and most rags of this type on guitar are
played in either key. It was a handy form for stretching out a song at dances and other
such social entertainment and one that, in the hands of someone like Blind Blake, became
a feat of improvisational “chops.”

One suspects Davis’s employment of a folk rag in “Twelve Sticks” served a
similar purpose, even a calling card, for his talents. Tellingly, it is the only recording we
have of Davis playing on the street, the most important context in the formation and early expression of his music. The title “Twelve Sticks” is rather enigmatic, with no known reference to either children’s games or toasts, though one performance, found on Demons & Angels, is given the subtitle “The Dozens,” suggesting the instrumental served as a musical boast that would have settled the debate over who was the better player in what was certainly a competitive environment among street musicians (and Davis was nothing if not competitive). The tune became a live standard in later years, but even in 1950, at the height of his street preaching in Harlem, he was performing it in public, which is how Tony Schwartz happened to tape it for his Folkways LP compilation of New York City street performers, Music in the Streets – and note that before Davis settles into the usual open position progression others typically employed in such a rag, he starts up the neck (measure 3) at the seventh position fretting all six strings in thick dominant-seventh chord spacing that was all his own.

But Davis also took a major cue from the classic piano rags of his era, and knew such numbers as “Dill Pickles Rag,” “St. Louis Tickle,” and a popular favorite of Davis’s during the folk revival, “Cincinnati Flow Rag,” which he learned from Willie Walker.\(^74\)

And while the source for this tune is unknown, it fits comfortably within the harmonic language of other such rags of the era, notably “Florida Rag,” a hit for both Vess L. Ossman in 1907 and Fred Van Eps in 1912.

\[\begin{align*}
\text{“Florida Rag”}^{75}: & \quad |V7/\| | I/\| | V7/\| | I/\| \\
& \quad |V7/\| | I/\| | V/ii - ii - I - V7 | I/\|
\end{align*}\]

\[\begin{align*}
\text{“Cincinnati Flow Rag”}^{76}: & \quad |V7/\| | I/\| | V7/\| | I - bVII13 - IV6 - bVI | \\
& \quad |V7/\| | I/\| | IV - ii - I - V/ii | V7/V - V7 - I/|
\end{align*}\]

Another tune, Scott Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag” (also referred to as “Make Believe Stunt”\(^77\)) became an instrumental tour de force for Davis alongside his “Soldier’s Drill.” He claimed to have learned this song as well from Walker, which might account for the name change. It also put the date Davis acquired the song some twelve to fifteen years after it had been published in 1899, at which point the Joplin number had fully entered the repertoires of many working musicians from brass bands and orchestras to soloists.

Played by Davis in the key of A (see example below), the song operates in four cell-like

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\(^{75}\)Taken from Vess L. Ossman’s performance (Victor 5058).

\(^{76}\)Although all performances essentially followed the same harmonic pattern, I have chosen the first commercially released version as my example, “Low Drag aka Cincinnati Flow Rag” from 1964’s *The Guitar & Banjo of Reverend Gary Davis* (Prestige/Folklore OBCCD-592-2, 2001).

\(^{77}\)Despite some claims to the contrary, all available versions by Davis of “Maple Leaf Rag” and “Make Believe Stunt,” are essentially the same tune. However, given the amount of non-Joplin material in the song, perhaps a title such as “Make Believe Stunt” is more appropriate.
sections (all in the tonic) that he freely juxtaposed into larger organizational patterns. This in turn provided length and added a certain improvisatory feel within the structure, which was lent additional spontaneity through the constant change-up in syncopated patterns on the diminished chord whenever it appeared (as in the four statements of measures 1-3 and 8-11) and the bVI pattern (as in the first half of measure 7), which he would extend sometimes into a repeated riff.

By looking at four sample performances from 1964 (studio, live, and private, with the same year chosen in order to eliminate the kinds of naturally-occurring changes in
structure and style that can happen over time) an arranging logic emerges. Specifically, B always goes with A, D always goes with C, and C always goes with A, leaving A able to go to any strain. Also, every performance ends on C. Allowing for slight variation, the core structure, then, becomes ABACADCB with the ordering of ADC or ABADC into a concluding statement or statements.

1. From The Guitar & Banjo of Reverend Gary Davis (Prestige/Folklore PR-14033, 1964):
   A B A C A D C A B A C A D C

2. From Manchester Free Trade Hall 1964 (Document DOCD 32-20-14, 2007):
   B A B A C A D C A B A D C

3. From At Allegheny College, Meadville, Pa., 1964 (Document DLP 527):
   A B A C A D C A B A D C A B A D C A B A D C

4. From private recording at Rick Ruskin’s parents house, Detroit, c. 1964:
   A B A C A D C A B A D C A B A D C

Davis’s version of “Maple Leaf Rag” also gives us insight into how he typically borrowed source material. Joplin’s composition, arguably the most well known rag of its day (and to this day, for that matter), is in the key of A-flat and presented in a sectional form typical of piano rags where different themes and often keys were strung together to create a longer piece of music. In the case of “Maple Leaf Rag,” the form is AA BB A CC DD, with A and B in the tonic, a C “trio” strain in the subdominant, and a D strain return to the tonic. Providing compositional balance and symmetry, Joplin placed a single A statement in the center of the piece. Davis uses four sections as well but not all are the same as Joplin. Specifically, he flips Joplin’s order of events and begins his arrangement with an initial idea (A strain, measures 1-4) taken from the second half of Joplin’s A section. Davis then introduces a B strain (measures 5-8) that is modeled on the first half
of Joplin’s A section, though he skips the transitional minor chord arpeggiation in the original. A third strain by Davis (measures 13-16) looks to Joplin’s B section proper though Davis adds a prominent habanera rhythm in the bass and a minor second dissonance (E against D#) in the melodic component of the arpeggio. In both the B and C strains, he expands on the bVI chord found in Joplin’s A strain for recurrent cadential type material, and in doing so, ignores the cadence Joplin wrote (essentially V/ii – ii – V9/V – V, the kind of circle of fifths idea folk rags were built on). Since this is something Davis could have translated with ease to his fretboard, his substitution can only be seen as an aesthetic/creative option, like so many others, that used what he felt he needed to make the piece Joplin-esque but nonetheless his own. Finally, Davis states a fourth strain that appears to be entirely his own though it possibly references (ever so subtly) the fourth section of Joplin’s composition through the appearance of a passing IV chord.

The end result is that, out of some eighty measures contained in Joplin’s original piece, Davis appropriates roughly half, all coming from the A and B sections, which were usually the most memorable strains in a formal rag.

MARCHES

Equally fascinating is the appropriation process that went into Davis’s other signature instrumental, known variously as “United States March,” “Civil War March,” “Civil War Parade,” “Soldier’s Drill,” and “Soldier’s March.” While “Civil War March,” was the title given the tune at its first recording by Moses Asch in 1945, subsequent references here will be to “Soldier’s Drill,” which is how Davis referred to it at least some of the time\(^78\) (the other fitting title would be “United States March” since a portion of Davis’s arrangement came from John Philip Sousa’s 1888 “Semper Fidelis” march, a.k.a., the “United States Marine Band” march).

Marches informed the development of ragtime, so it makes sense that Davis would have had a few in his repertoire. He had two that we know of, one referred to as “Marine Band” and the better-known “Soldier’s Drill.” Like “Maple Leaf Rag,” it was a virtuosic showpiece with several time signatures and tonal areas including one section played in the rather challenging key of F. And like his Joplin arrangement, it shows how Davis took the essence of another composition basically to create his own composition.

As a working musician in the South, Davis would have had opportunity to play such a “highbrow” piece of music. Blind Virginia guitarist/singer Daniel Womack – a bluesman turned preacher like Davis – claimed he played marches at end-of-the-school-

\(^{78}\)Correspondence with Ernie Hawkins, 11 October 2009.
year ceremonies where children would march in time to the music; such assemblies were indeed commonplace in the rural South well into the 1940s. Explained Womack: “It’s entertaining, for a group you know. Like they are marching, a drill, you know. Like you get so many, about ten or twelve or maybe twenty or more and they’re all lined up. And everybody’s stepping together. It’s a march.”

Elizabeth Cotten also played a “Graduation March,” a much less formal tune than Davis’s piece that harkened to a time when Chapel Hill locals would turn out to see students commence at the University of North Carolina.

I remember the time when the students have the commencement. Well the colored people would make just as much to do over it as the mothers and fathers that had sons there to graduate. When they say commencement’s next Tuesday or whatever day it would be, not only my parents but other people there, they’d buy their children little new slippers . . . dresses . . . hats . . . going to the commencement. And we’d stay all day long . . . The people they used to make tables . . . just take a board and put legs under it, put a white cloth over that and sell food. The biggest thing that used to sell was lemonade from what I can remember. And we’d go down town and stay all day long just to get to see those students march. They would have a beautiful march. They’d have on their black robes and their caps with the tassels you know, and we’d watch them march in. If there would be room they would let us in but there was never no room. So we used to hang in the windows, I didn’t but my brothers did, just to get to see them march in. And then that is when they’d play that band song that I pick on the guitar; that’s what they’d march to.

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79Lornell, liner notes to Virginia Traditions, 8. It’s doubtful that what Womack played were really marches; David Evans, correspondence with author, 25 October 2010. Evans recorded Babe Stovall playing a “Maypole March,” for example, that wasn’t really a march; see South Mississippi Blues (Rounder 2009, 1970). Stovall’s number was perhaps better identified as “Maypole Song” on another recording, Babe Stovall Story (Southern Sound SD 203, 1976).

80Ibid.

81Found on Elizabeth Cotten, Freight Train and Other North Carolina Folk Songs and Tunes (Smithsonian/Folkways SF 40009, 1989); original recording 1958.

82Mike Seeger, liner notes, Cotten, Freight Train and Other North Carolina Folk Songs, 5-6.
Beyond playing such a march at school ceremonies (if indeed, Davis was ever hired for such a gig – he never mentioned playing any), the function of “Soldier’s Drill” in Davis’s repertoire would have been two-fold: it was virtuosic, a number that separated himself from other players in more ways than one; and it would have connected with audiences either at the time he said he worked it up at the end of World War I or during the period it was first documented at the end of World War II. The long improvisatory stretches on Reveille alone would have made an instant connection with people who had lived through either war – bugle calls having been a mainstay in popular music at the time, whether the jazz standard co-authored by Jack Pettis, “Bugle Call Rag,” which received its debut in 1922 by the New Orleans Rhythm Kings and carried over into the swing era by Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller and others; 1930’s “Soldier Boy Blues” by the Phillips’ Louisville Jug Band, which opened with Reveille on the saxophone before going into a twelve-bar blues; or the ebullient pinnacle of American wartime song in the Andrews Sisters’ 1941 hit “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy,” about the jazz trumpeter who makes the company jump “when he plays Reveille.”

In 1945, Davis debuted his march for Asch, the short-lived record label begun by Folkways founder Moses Asch in 1940 that put out important early recordings of Lead Belly, Pete Seeger, and Woody Guthrie. How Davis came to the attention of Asch is unclear, though it is possible Lead Belly made the introduction, or perhaps it was simple logistics, given Davis’s proximity to the Asch studio, which was located at 117 West 46th Street and had an open door policy to musicians. Davis’s choice to play his tour-de-

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83 Recorded circa August 1930 and released as Brunswick 7207 and Vocalion 02784.

force instrumental would have certainly gotten Asch’s attention. No one played guitar like that in the folk or blues scenes that Asch was busy documenting, and it had the added element of being timely (something Davis made clear by shouting “Shoot that Jap!” mid-performance). However, the performance appears not to have been released in its day, possibly due to time constrictions of the 78 format – Asch switched to the long-playing LP format when he founded Folkways in 1948, the same year Columbia Records unveiled the new technology. “Civil War March” clocks in at over five minutes, which would have nixed its chances to fit on either a 10” 78, which had about three minutes of playable space, or a 12” record, which had around four-and-a-half minutes. The Asch version, in fact, didn’t make its appearance on LP until 1965 with the release of The Asch Recordings, 1939-1945 – Vol. 2 (ASCH AA4), by which time Davis had long made the song a live staple and had recorded it for his 1964 Prestige album, Guitar & Banjo of Reverend Gary Davis (Prestige/Folklore, PR-14033).

The level of image painting in Davis’s tune is worth noting and strongly suggests the nineteenth-century programmatic battle song, which had been something of an aural analog to panoramas popular at that time.\(^8\) Memorable among the genre was “Battle of Manassas” by piano virtuoso Blind Tom, whose signature work about the Civil War conflict (a.k.a., the Battle of Bull Run) was an instrumental epic that imitated the sounds of battle on the piano. And it is worth noting the high degree of scene painting that visually impaired musicians Blind Tom and Reverend Gary Davis brought to such war tunes; in Davis’s case, it was another example, like his harmonica music, where the

visual elements were arguably stronger than most visual references in his songs with lyrics.

In “Soldier’s Drill,” Davis imitated an array of infantry-related sounds, presenting a loose series of events, including the following:86

1) Drum roll:


86Dean Meredith offered a particularly insightful analysis in “Notes on ‘The United States March’,” Blues Magazine 2, no. 3 (June 1976): 41-53. He likened the overall arrangement to a cinematic experience, observing of Reveille that “the bugler must be a jazz trumpet player who’s just been drafted,” 41-42.
2) Wake-up call (Reveille):


3) Recruits marching:

4) Gunshots through use of snap pizzicato on the downbeat:


It’s worth noting, however, that no military registration card has been found for Davis (registering a common enough occurrence by blind African American musicians). Regardless, we get the feeling he lived vicariously through this song, becoming a soldier whose “sight/s” (double meaning intended) allowed the gun-loving guitarist to fire away with unbridled glee (not to mention the added implication of Davis being a “soldier in the army of the Lord” of which he also sang).

“Soldier’s Drill” is constructed, broadly speaking, like other marches and rags, i.e., through the inclusion of several melodic strains and sectional modulation (one of but a few times where Davis modulated within a song, “Florida Blues” being another example). Bookended by various bugle calls (mostly the first part of Reveille with hints of First Call and Taps), Davis’s march consisted of two prominent strains, an A section in the key of F and a B section in the key of C. Each strain consists of two 16-bar sections with slight variation at cadences, creating a larger 64-bar construction. The B strain borrows with chromatic license what is essentially the pick-up and two bars from the B strain of “Semper Fidelis,” the rest of Davis’s strain coming from elsewhere. Likewise,
the A strain also seems to be a product of Davis’s own creation – and even if a pre-conceived source eventually is discovered, it’s unlikely that Davis would have lifted it entirely, given his penchant here and elsewhere for using mere fragments of ideas for his own arrangements. We might safely conclude, then, that “Soldier’s Drill” is as much a Davis original as any jazz performance that uses a quote of a well-known song as a springboard for personal ideas, commentary and audience identification and engagement.  

87 There is no resemblance to material in any of Sousa’s other marches, nor those by America’s other leading march composer of the period, Perry S. Gilmore, nor with folk march variants such as a “Civil War March” played on mountain dulcimer by Dora Harmon, found on American Folk Song Festival: Jean Thomas, the Traipsin’ Woman (Folkways Records, FW02358, 1960).
A trio-like transition section hints at other keys, a sequence on E and then G that suggests bugle calls as well:


Davis played this transitional section four times in every documented performance using a different cadence, with every statement including a boogie woogie figure in the final go-round. The four endings tended to play out in the following order:
Transition ending 1:


Transition ending 2:


Transition ending 3:

Transition ending 4:


Davis’s seven preserved performances show remarkable stability over the twenty-plus years he played the march, and it can be considered one of his tunes, alongside “Samson and Delilah,” that were essentially arranged with predictable patterns and structure. Fluctuations in performance times – from five-and-a-half minutes to more than twelve minutes – can be accounted for by the wide range of tempos he chose, and in the introductory and concluding bugle call sections which were, for the most part, the two parts of the march that welcomed improvisation at length, triadic bugle calls syncopated into clarion calls of jazzy spontaneity (and one has to wonder how much the Andrews Sisters hit inspired Davis in that regard).
Recorded performances of “United States March” by Reverend Gary Davis\(^8\) (t = transition, tb = transition with boogie woogie figure; A’ = variant based in part on Reveille):

1. 1945 (5:30): intro AA BB t1 BB t3 BB t2 BB tb B outro
2. 1956/57 (5:37): intro AA BB t1 B t2 BB t3 B tb B A outro
3. 1958/59 (7:54): intro AA BB t1 BB t2 BB tb BB t3 BB A outro
4. 1962 (8:05): intro AA BB t1 BB t2 BB t3 BB tb B A outro
5. 1964 (6:32): intro AA BB t1 BB t2 BB t3 BB tb B A outro
6. 1965 (6:37): intro AA BB t1 BB t2 BB t3 BB tb B A outro
7. 1968/70 (11:21): intro AA A’A BB t1 BB t2 BB t3 BB tb B A outro

Elements found in introductions and conclusions (D = drums, B = bugle calls, M = marching):

1. 1945: intro (DBM) outro (B)
2. 1956/57: intro (DBM) outro (B)
3. 1958/59: intro (BM) outro (B)
4. 1962: intro (DBM) outro (MB)
5. 1964: intro (DBM) outro (MB)
6. 1965: intro (BM) outro (MB)
7. 1968/70: intro (DBM) outro (MB)

The above charts show all seven performances to have an introduction centered around improvisations on Reveille with marching effects, while five also include drum effects. All seven conclude with further bugle call improvisations, mostly on Reveille though some phrasing hints at Taps and First Call, and from 1962 on, marching effects were part of the conclusion as well. Six begin with two statements of an A strain, and six return to the A strain once at the end. All seven state a B strain five times, five with the

\(^8\)The 1945 recording is available on a number of recordings including Rev. Blind Gary Davis: Complete Recorded Works 1935-1949 in Chronological Order (Document DOCD-5060, 1991), and If I Had My Way: Early Home Recordings (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings SFWCD 40123, 2003); the 1956/57 performance can be found on Lifting the Veil: The First Bluesmen (World Arbiter 2008, 2007); the 1958/59 version is on Demons and Angels: The Ultimate Collection (Shanachie 6117, 2001); the live 1962 reading is on Children of Zion: In Concert (Transatlantic TRA 249, 1971; Kicking Mule KM 101, 1974; Heritage HT 308, 1985) and Reverend Gary Davis (Heritage HT CD 02, 1989); the 1964 studio version comes from The Guitar & Banjo of Reverend Gary Davis (Prestige/Folklore PR-14033, 1964; Original Blues Classics OBCCD-592-2, 1990/2001); the 1965 live version is from Live at Newport (Vanguard 79588-2, 2001); the 1968/70 reading comes from a private tape by Ernie Hawkins.
first four statements played twice and the final B strain played once. All seven have four transitional sections with four different tags (given the numbers/letters above). The only true departures in the above structure were the absence of a final A strain in the 1945 performance and the inclusion of a new A strain idea based in part on Reveille in an Ernie Hawkins taping circa 1968/70.

The locus classicus, or typical case, therefore, looks something like this:

intro (DRM) AA BB t1 BB t2 BB t3 BB tb B A outro (RM).

Two performances have such a structure – 1962 and 1964 – and we might include his 1965 Newport performance as well (only the drum effect is missing from the intro).

When we look at a possible function behind the song, “Soldier’s Drill”/”Civil War March” also works as an identifier since it fulfilled two of the three general types of Civil War songs: 1) hortatory songs designed to instill a certain enthusiasm, even jingoism; and 2) songs concerned with slavery and African Americans.  

On the hortatory/jingoist level, the tune clearly casts a musical net of patriotic ardor, especially in relation to the Great War. While Davis claimed to have added the song to his repertoire around 1918, he nonetheless must have perfected it in the years leading up to and during WWII, which would explain why it didn’t show up in a recorded context until 1945. For example, the boogie woogie statement he consistently inserted would have likely been added in the late 1930s/early 1940s, when the genre had reached its peak, having spread over the better part of a decade from barrelhouse piano circles to a broad spectrum of popular music. In addition, such asides as “Shoot that Jap!” and “You

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son-of-a-bitch, you’ll never get rich, you’re in the army now” suggest a date closer to World War II.90


Davis also used the song’s patriotic setting to offer commentary on the draft and the Vietnam War, referring to conscription in humorous if not-so-veiled terms in a 1962 show at Pennsylvania’s Swarthmore College, where he offered the comment: “Some of you got girlfriends you hate to leave, but you’re going into the army,” before playing the march.91 By 1965, at which point America had fully entered the Vietnam conflict, Davis’s performances, especially during Reveille, could elicit nervous laughter from the crowds, such as those who had gathered to hear him that year at the Newport Folk Festival. More pointed was a private performance he gave for Ernie Hawkins and his girlfriend at the time, Linda, stating “I’m gonna put you over there now for awhile, the

90In his autobiography, Reagan-era ambassador to Luxembourg, John E. Dolibois, identified such verse as part of a WWII military song which he heard an anonymous Army recruit sing: “You’re in the army now, you’re not behind the plow, you son-of-a-bitch, you’ll never get rich, you’re in the army now.” Patterns of Circles: An Ambassador’s Story (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1989), 52.

war in Vietnam.” At that moment, Davis made no bones about it, finding the universal soldier in his pastiche, an 11-minute rendition at once comical and – given the paced, somber tempo – dead serious.

Yet another interpretation aligns the composition to the history of Civil War numbers that concerned themselves with black freedom. If, indeed, Davis ever referred to his tune as a “Civil War March” (which is how it was listed in its first recording), there is the unvoiced yet inescapable assertion that Davis was playing it, on one level, as a “Civil Rights March,” where the human rights struggle presented itself as a metaphorical battle. Davis never talked about civil rights, but that didn’t mean he was unaware nor had no thoughts on the topic. Indeed, the tiniest New York Times mention on Davis is one of the most revealing, a news brief stating that he would be appearing in a 1960 folk concert at Columbia University, sponsored by the sophomore class of Barnard College, to benefit the National Scholarship Service and Fund for Negro Students and aid sit-in students expelled from college. His appearance as the event’s headliner sent a message sure enough – in his own way, Davis, too, was fighting the good fight. But like many aspects in his life, he opted to play out his feelings, a ritualization of sorts of larger philosophical, theological and ethical ideas that he certainly knew firsthand. Especially because of his experiences – where speaking one’s mind on certain subjects could create more harm than good for an elderly blind, black man – Davis would have learned that performing such ideas through the subversive interjection of song was not only safer, but it could also be more persuasive.


In playing his usual assortment of secular/blues material with gospel in a live setting, Davis not only asserted different aspects of who he was but offered different ways to connect with his audiences: blues to bring them single-file through the door, gospel to unite and uplift them as a collective. A song such as “United States March” essentially did both at the same time, a showpiece of individual prowess that, under the right circumstance such as Newport, suggested – coming as it did during the height of the Civil Rights struggle – the common identity of all as American. Just as the Great War had unified a country, Davis’s “Soldier’s Drill” made recruits of his audience, a subtle reminder that black and white could meet on moral high ground once again. In that regard, Davis has yet to be appreciated for the hold, as small as it may have been, that his music nonetheless had on the hearts and minds of that era’s freedom fighters.

Yet Davis was of a situational, cultural, and generational era that by necessity had to mask and deflect overt commentary that wasn’t religious. When it came to political and social conflict, he never spoke out. That’s not to say he didn’t have feelings or opinions on such matters. He simply made his sentiments known through his music, of which “Soldier’s Drill” was one example. Another was “There’s Destruction in That Land,” a song he wrote in 1935 in the years leading up to World War II that addressed then-turbulent times within a “day of judgment” framework.\(^\text{94}\) It only took on added resonance during the Civil Rights era, and in the documentary *Black Roots*, activist

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\(^\text{94}\)Said Davis, “That song come to me 1935 just ’fore the war got started;” 4:47-4:52 of track 4 from a digital copy of cassette tape 5a, private recording of Reverend Gary Davis made by Ernie Hawkins, ca. 1968/70, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. One assumes Davis is referring to WWII and not the Ethiopian conflict, which was making news in the African American press in the 1930s. Davis shared the same detail, that he wrote the song around 1935 because of the coming war, to interviewers Stephen T. Rye, John Offord, and Richard A. Noblett; see Rye, Offord, and Noblett, “The Rev. Gary Davis,” *Blues Unlimited* 39 (December 1966): 12.
lawyer Florynce Kennedy weeps while Davis plays the song. Davis also had a surprising adaptation of Bob Dylan’s “Masters of War” that he shared with a few students. 95 Played instrumentally, Davis’s version retains the shape and phrasing of Dylan’s melody (based as it was on Jean Ritchie’s arrangement of the English ballad “Nottamun Town”):

![Musical notation]


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95Davis played it for Ernie Hawkins and Joan Fenton, who both recorded it – Fenton’s tape recording of it, however, was among items stolen from her (Joan Fenton, interview by author, 16 July 2008, Davis & Elkins College, Elkins, West Virginia, digital recording).
Yet Davis added his own distinct touches, including the use of the twelve-string guitar and a call-and-response bass riff that bent the triple meter bar line with phrasal expansiveness closer to lined-out hymnody than Appalachian folk song – the musical minister’s equivalent to Blind Willie Johnson’s “Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground.”

How Davis acquired the song is unknown even to his students. He crossed paths with any of a number of musicians associated with it, including Jean Ritchie, Odetta, and Dylan himself, the preacher having been something of an important influence on the nascent songwriter during his Greenwich Village days. Davis’s enigmatic cover of the song was perhaps a way of paying respect to someone who had taken musical notice of him, or perhaps he was touched by the pacifist sentiment of the song – his reading is nothing if not profoundly moving, a brooding heart of darkness mini-epic set in E minor, the key Davis reserved for his most emotionally-wresting material.

**POPULAR SONG**

Davis borrowed many ideas and tunes from the popular stage, lending his own interpretation to hits of the day in the decades leading up to his evangelical calling and relocation to New York City. Prior to his religious conversion sometime in the 1930s, he busily absorbed all manner of popular song from ragtime and jazz to sentimental song and vaudeville blues in addition to traditional material and his own creations. Yet he played each song with enough individuality that none could be considered mere imitation. To attract foot traffic, Davis the street musician took enough of a song’s character that potential tippers would recognize it and respond accordingly with coins, but he left the parameters open enough for his own spontaneous musicality to control the situation.

Many examples only came to light during the 1960s thanks to the home recordings made by Grossman and Hawkins of material Davis was either reluctant to express in concert or had simply forgotten until his memory had been jogged by
inquisitive students. What’s interesting is that despite the change in popular music tastes over the first half of the twentieth century, Davis’s ability to absorb hits of the day, especially from the first three decades, didn’t alter his style. Rather, he molded each song to his manner of playing the guitar, rendering even the most urbane number into a street corner symphony that was Gary Davis’s voice alone. This material also challenges notions of what constitutes folk authenticity in someone like Davis who, though he infused all he played with a style cultivated from regional, largely rural preferences, what he chose to play had little to do with preserving local traditions and more to do with honing a style that took what it needed from everything in his purview to make a musical man who became his own tradition.

If we go decade by decade, we can see how Davis often cast his interpretive net to popular song for ideas and repertoire. From the turn of the century, they would include “At a Georgia Camp Meeting” by Kerry Mills (1897); Scott Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag” (1899); the Hughie Cannon classic “Bill Bailey, Won’t You Please Come Home?” (1902); and the Theron Catlan Bennett hit “St. Louis Tickle” (1904). The 1910s found Davis adding such songs as “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary” (1912); the 1916 religious parody “Pray for the Lights to Go Out;” “Florida Blues” by William King Phillips (1916), and several from the Shelton Brooks songbook, including “All Night Long” (1912), “Walkin’ the Dog” (1916; not to be confused with the oft-performed string of variations in C that Davis called “Walking Dog Blues,” this Brooks composition was

86Davis, of course, was not the only prewar traditional artist to find inspiration in popular hits of the day. Country performers, for example, could be just as bold as their blues counterparts in appropriating popular material. Ernest Stoneman did a version of “At a Georgia Camp Meeting,” while Gid Tanner performed string band versions of “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary” and “Darktown Strutter’s Ball” (the latter also covered by a range of country acts from Fiddlin’ John Carson to Bob Wills and Milton Brown).
played by Davis in F), and “The Darktown Strutters’ Ball” (1917). In the 1920s, Davis incorporated Al Jolson’s 1924 hit, “I Wonder What’s Become of Sally”; the James P. Johnson/Cecil Mack jazz standard, “Old Fashioned Love” (from the 1923 musical Runnin’ Wild); the 1923 Bessie Smith and Alberta Hunter hit, “Aggravatin’ Papa” (published a year earlier by authors Roy Turk, J. Russel Robinson, and Addy Britt); and the 1929 Ruth Etting number “Mean to Me” (which became a jazz standard in 1937 after Billie Holiday had her say with it backed by the Teddy Wilson Orchestra). Davis also seems to have been a fan of Gene Austin – who vied with Al Jolson for popularity on the 1920s pop music stage – and knew both “Yes Sir, That’s My Baby” and “Bye Bye Blackbird” (hits in 1925 and 1926 respectively for Austin). Yet by the 1930s Davis appears to have added fewer songs, the result perhaps of now being in his 30s as a musician, a time when core repertoire is typically established. More likely, it was the result of his conversion and ordination as a preacher. Indeed, most of what Davis added after that point was sacred song, though he could recall in later life a tune such as the 1933 Harold Arlen/Ted Koehler classic “Stormy Weather” or the sentimental number “Tie Me to Your Apron Strings Again,” which was recorded by numerous country artists in the 1930s beginning with John McGhee and Frank Welling (Gennett 7291, 1930) and including Bob Wills (Vocalion 03854, 1937) and Riley Puckett (Bluebird B-8371, 1939).

By the 1950s and his nascent rediscovery, Davis was adding an occasional secular tune, the most curious being “You Belong to Me,” an early 1950s pop hit best known in a performance by singer Jo Stafford. What possessed him to learn the song is hard to say. Was it a love song he shared with Annie – perhaps a popular song they both enjoyed listening to – or was it an excuse to hone his repertoire and abilities in the key of
F? Stafford’s version was in F as was Davis’s. The latter, I suspect, likely was drawn to the song both for its melodic and harmonic qualities as well as for the setting in a favorite, if challenging, key of his.

Certain song types are largely missing from Davis’s oeuvre, even though they were commonly performed by Anglo and African American performers alike as part of the musical atmosphere of the early twentieth century. Some types are obvious, such as traditional work songs, which Davis didn’t maintain for good reason: his disability precluded him not only from traditional labor but from the body of work songs that circulated in such a context. Others include pseudo-spirituals, or spiritual parodies, which lends support to the earnestness of Davis’s faith and how he expressed it. Nor were there any racially offensive tunes. True, he played some mildly denigrating material in the form of minstrel holdovers such as “Raise a Ruckus Tonight,” but there was none of turn-of-the-century “coon” stereotyping, suggesting that Davis maintained a dignified air toward race, song, and the reflexive power of identity that coursed between each. He came of age, after all, at a time when other black musicians were expressing their own rejection of such material. The verisimilitude of the blues was one way black performers forged a new presentation of the African American experience, but so did professional composers, for example, brothers James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamund Johnson, who made a conscious effort to counter the stereotypes and negative images of black people in popular songs of the day through their own arrangements and compositions (mostly of spirituals).97

If Davis’s identity was largely wrapped up in the songs he chose to perform, then we can say that his music expressed a deep, abiding spirituality tempered by a healthy love for life and its many pleasures. Like the emerging collective of blues singers in the first decades of the twentieth century, Davis offered alternatives to a black experience that had been defined in the stereotypical broad strokes of “coon” songs and parody during the Jim Crow era. And in that sense Davis is perhaps as much a bluesman as he is a gospel singer, for in his secular, sometimes bawdy, material, he rarely reduces his characters to ethnic caricature, maintaining instead the humanity of his songs’ subjects—black men, after all, have the same right to indulge in carnal pleasures as any white man, and by celebrating/acting out these anecdotes on stage, Davis reaffirmed the status of himself and his race in the American mix. In its own way, Davis’s music was as bold in its pronouncement as that of James Brown: “Say it loud, I’m black and I’m proud!”

There were a few exceptions, of course. As a product of the ragtime and vaudeville era, Davis knew and performed several popular songs with connections to the coon song type (though, it is worth noting, he never sang the word “coon” or used other demeaning terms). Stefan Grossman recorded Davis doing “Bill Bailey, Won’t You Please Come Home?” The song—written by Hughie Cannon and a hit on both sides of the Atlantic in 1902 with recorded versions that year by Arthur Collins for Columbia and Silas Leachman for Victor—spawned a number of immediate imitations. In such “bully” songs, the black male was portrayed as uncontrollably jealous, a “fusion of the imagery of the ostentatious black and the jilted lover.”98 While it has been argued that such tunes

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98 Dennison, Scandalize My Name, 372.
were inherently racist attempts to assuage white America’s fears of black sexuality,\textsuperscript{99} it has also been offered that the success of “Bill Bailey” nonetheless helped herald a change from denigrating coon songs to a more racially tolerant treatment of African Americans in song.\textsuperscript{100} Such polemic, of course, would have been of little concern to Davis, who most certainly added the tune to his song bag because of its extreme popularity and because of its applicability to his ragtime approach on guitar.

Grossman also recorded Davis performing “At a Georgia Camp Meeting,” a cakewalk written as an instrumental in 1897 by pop hit-maker Kerry Mills, though lyrics were added a year later when Dan W. Quinn recorded the song for Columbia.\textsuperscript{101} And perhaps it is worth noting that Davis played both “At a Georgia Camp Meeting” and “Bill Bailey” instrumentally, admiring them for their “ragged” music over the derogatory, racist imagery that accompanied earlier sung versions. This was also the case for a song he knew called “Pray for the Lights to Go Out.”\textsuperscript{102} Advertised as “A New Negro Shouting Song, That New ‘Balling the Jack’ Song,” this religious parody was published in 1916 with words credited to Renton Tunnah and music by Will E. Skidmore (both probable pseudonyms). Against music that has the lilt and phrasing of gospel, the lyrics proclaim the sexual proclivities of supposedly upstanding church members.

Father was a deacon in a hard shell church,

\textsuperscript{99}Ibid., 373.


\textsuperscript{101}In the original sheet music publication, Mills indicated that his two-step march/cakewalk should not be used for any actual “Religious Exercises.” See Kerry Mills, “At a Georgia Camp Meeting (New York: F. A. Mills, 1897), 3; accessed online at the University of Colorado Digital Sheet Music Collection at \url{http://ucblibraries.colorado.edu/cgi-bin/sheetmusic.pl?RagAtAGeorgia&Rag&main}, 26 October 2010.

\textsuperscript{102}Ernie Hawkins private tape 8, side B.
Way down South where I was born
People used to come to church from miles about,
Just to hear the Holy work go on
Father grabs a sister round the neck and says,
Sister won’t you sing this song.
The sister tells the deacon that she didn’t have time,
Felt religion coming on
Just then somebody got up turn’d the lights all out
And you ought to heard that sister shout.
She hollered Brother, if you want to spread joy,
Just pray for the lights to go out.
She called on Deacon for to kneel and pray
You ought to heard that sister shout.
Throw’d up both hands and got way back,
Two steps forw’d and ball’d the Jack,
She hollered Brother, if you want to spread joy,
Just pray for the lights to go out.\(^{103}\)

Davis didn’t sing the words here as well, though he chuckled when giving the title
(and perhaps Davis found enough truth in the song, given his own well-documented
randiness, that it served as a healthy reminder of his own inclinations – then again, Davis
could have just as easily liked the song as another example of the rich repertoire he
cultivated in the key of F). As a final thought, Davis never recorded any of this material
commercially but only shared it with students in a private home setting. As a man of the
cloth, Davis certainly understood the religious parody enough to not want to share this
side of his musicality with the public at large.

Also largely absent from Davis’s extensive repertory are so-called “chicken”
songs. Poultry references existed aside coons as a black stereotype, and many chicken
songs were performed on the turn-of-the-century popular stage and on record, usually
reinforcing in the process the pained bromide of the black male as thief.\(^{104}\) Debuting on

\(^{103}\)From the Duke University Libraries Digital Collections of Historic American Sheet Music at
http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/hasm (last accessed 16 August 2010).
the minstrel/vaudeville stage with such numbers as “Dem Chickens Roost Too High” by Fred Lyons (1887), “There Is No Chicken That Can Roost Too High for Me” by W. J. Simons (1899), “Chicken Don’t Roost Too High” by Bob Cole and J. Rosamund Johnson (1899), “Dat’s De Way to Spell Chicken” by Sidney L. Perrin and Bob Slater (1902), and “Bake Dat Chicken Pie” by Frank Dumont (1906), this song family of sorts crisscrossed between folk and vaudeville contexts into the early recording era, generating performances by both black and white musicians and in every genre from jazz to country. Among the examples, many based in part on the above published tunes, were: “Bake Dat Chicken Pie” by Arthur Collins and Byron G. Harlan (1907), “Chicken Roost Behind the Moon,” Ernest Thompson (1924); “Chickens Don’t Roost Too High For Me,” Arthur Tanner and the Dixie String Band (1925); “A Chicken Can Waltz the Gravy Around,” Sam Jones (a.k.a., Stovepipe No. 1) and David Crockett (1927); “Chicken, You Can’t Roost Too High for Me,” Uncle Tom Collins (1927); “Under the Chicken Tree,” Earl McDonald’s Original Louisville Jug Band (1927); “Chicken You Can Roost Behind the Moon,” the Beale Street Sheiks (1927); and “C-H-I-C-K-E-N Spells Chicken,” Kirk McGee and Blythe Poteet (1928).

The frequency of such material among black artists was not necessarily a concession to popular tastes, racially charged though they could be. Writes Steven C. Tracy in his landmark book, *Goin’ to Cincinnati: A History of the Blues in the Queen City*: “Of course the stereotype of the chicken thief, like the stereotypes of the watermelon stealer, the razor toter, the lazy good-for-nothing, and the sex-crazy buck and wanton temptress, can be a joke to blacks as well as whites – for blacks can laugh about

104Dennison, *Scandalize My Name*, 364.
how silly whites are to accept the stereotype, and they can laugh about making money by deceiving whites who don’t realize that the performers are playing a role."\(^{105}\)

Davis too gave passing reference to the chicken thief stereotype in “Little Boy, Little Boy, Who Made Your Britches?” on which he sang:

> Good God, she’s a-cookin’ in the kitchen.  
> Cook got mad and stole all the chicken.\(^{106}\)

He also performed in private a spontaneous version of “Chicken, You Can’t Roost Too High for Me,” which was based on the same fiddle number as recorded by Arthur Tanner and was a tune Davis likely cultivated during his string band days. Davis protégé John Cephas knew a version of “Chicken Can’t Roost Too High for Me” that gives some context to the appeal such a song would have had for black entertainers, aware as they must have been of the racist underpinnings in this song type. Said Cephas to a blues researcher in 1980: “You know, back in the country, uh, where I came from, you know, we used to dance all night long, you know, a-drinking home brew and, uh, corn liquor and, uh, we used to have set dances – we used to dance set dances – and, uh, I’m gonna play a little, uh, number here, there’s no words to it, but it’s just, uh, just a beat. But, uh, we used to start a-playing this, we’d have the guitars and the violins and harmonicas, and, uh, we’d dance all night long.”\(^{107}\) Davis likely would have kept “Chicken, You Can’t Roost Too High for Me” in his repertoire for the similar purpose of entertaining the


country folk, black and white, that he played for as a young man, though one shouldn’t
discount its possible nostalgic function. Of his known manual labor, Davis mentioned not
only working in the cotton and corn fields and pulling fodder,\textsuperscript{108} but tending chickens on
the family farm as a child, mentioning how he “raised chickens and things like that.
When the chickens see me coming, you understand, they’d light up off the ground, light
up on top of me. They didn’t know what it was all about, But I did.”\textsuperscript{109} And perhaps such
a song triggered memories of youth and rural life for someone who had been fully
urbanized the last thirty years of his life. In the one lyric stanza Davis was able to recall,
the effect was less comical than it was a reminder of food and family, of celebration and
community: “Oh chicken, so good and sweet/It’s good to eat/Chicken make the sky all
brown/Chicken, pass the gravy around.”\textsuperscript{110}

Davis didn’t feel the need to share such material with an audience, and there is
perhaps a certain communicative intent missing as a result beyond wanting to share a
song from his past with a favorite student. Yet the kind of material Davis played with
regularity in private for a few trustworthy acolytes carries its own significance. If, as
Mark Anthony Neal writes, black life was partly defined by its covert social spaces –
especially in the South where the juke and church allowed a kind of public conversation
challenging the limitations of said life\textsuperscript{111} – it’s possible that Davis found his own covert
space in the confines of his New York apartment teaching, playing, and joking in front of

\textsuperscript{108}Reverend Gary Davis, interview by Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold, April/May 1951, TMs
(photocopy) the Alan Lomax Archive, New York City, reel 1, side 2, p. 3.


\textsuperscript{110}Ernie Hawkins private tape 6, side A.

\textsuperscript{111}Mark Anthony Neal, What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Popular Culture
(New York: Routledge, 1999), 49.
his students, where the secular music of his past (not to mention black America as a whole) found voice once again, and where the full humanity of his life experience could finally be celebrated without prejudice or fear. A song like “Chicken, You Can’t Roost Too High for Me” became then more than some half-forgotten cadence of minstrel sentiment. It reopened the door to a conversation in danger of becoming silenced during the necessary progress of the Civil Rights struggle. By the 1960s, soul music was what connected with black folk, but Davis’s dollops of old-time wisdom were a vibrant reminder that the weight of oral history must not be swept aside in the process. Davis’s strong injection of secular song into his art later in life was more than giving his (largely white) fans what they wanted to hear. It was his own reconstruction of a time that had once defined black America and, under the Reverend’s watch, was not about to be forgotten.
“ONLY FRIEND I HAVE IS GONE”: REVEREND GARY DAVIS AND THE BLUES

As this chapter will show, Reverend Gary Davis’s relationship with blues music could be conflicted and contradictory, and yet it was an essential part of his musical character well into his final years.

Much of the late musician’s reputation and appeal continues to come from fans of pre-WWII guitar blues despite his having played little in the form. In fact, only roughly a third (34%) of his known secular repertoire and even less (15.7%) of his total repertoire would fall within the blues genre. This is both a larger and smaller number of blues performances depending on which argument you challenge. The first prevailing consensus is that Davis abandoned blues when he became a preacher in the 1930s. This was clearly not the case given the abundance of blues that pepper his performances from the 1950s on in both private and public settings. The second consensus is that Davis’s music, secular and sacred alike, was defined by a guitar style that attracted revivalist fans for its displays of bluesy flourishes and therefore should be considered blues in a larger, looser sense of the term. Davis the evangelist would have rejected this broader distinction (as would his wife Annie, who approved of his gospel material, no matter how bluesy it might have sounded, but conveniently left the room when he taught the real thing).

It could be argued then that Davis’s enduring legacy as a bluesman is largely the result of how he continues to be defined by his fan base. Jimmie Rodgers, by analogy, was not a country singer in the traditional sense, but added many progressive elements borrowed from vaudeville, the blues, jazz, and various ethnic expressions (the yodel and
the Hawaiian steel guitar). As Bill Malone intimates in his landmark book, *Country Music U.S.A.*, Rodgers, whose aspirations were that of a popular music singer, was a country artist because those who identified with his music were by and large country folk and the Southern working class: “When his audiences of railroad workers, truck drivers, laborers, farmers, and small-town people heard his songs, they recognized him as one of their own.”¹ The same could be said to apply to Davis, whose music connected with a larger secular audience through their own projections on the author of “Cocaine Blues.”

Who he really was – a Christian preacher and musical evangelist who had formerly performed secular music and lived the life of a secular musician – was not uncommon within rural prewar blues culture. There were bluesmen who started as preachers such as Son Hosue, those who flirted with preaching such as Charley Patton and Big Bill Broonzy, and those like Davis who made the total leap of faith from bluesmen to preachers and sanctified singers, often in their 30s or later in life, such as Rubin Lacy, Arnold “Gatemouth” Moore, Ishman Bracey, Roebuck “Pop” Staples, Johnny Williams, Skip James, Jimmy Preston, Blind Roosevelt Darby, Robert Wilkins, and most famous of all, Thomas Dorsey, who as Georgia Tom introduced hokum records to the race market with slide guitar partner Tampa Red before taking the lessons of barrelhouse piano and applying them to his brand of gospel music.²

The ease with which musicians made the switch could be explained in part by the central role religion and religious song had in the lives of rural black families – well


²One wonders whether Robert Johnson would have made a similar move to the church had he lived long enough; see Alan Lomax’s field interview with mother Mary Johnson, who recounts her son’s deathbed conversion (“remembered,” as it were, some five decades after the fact by the author) in *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: Pantheon, 1993; reprint, New York: The New Press, 2002), 14-15.
before a musician took to the blues, he or she would have been exposed as a child to religious music. B.B. King, for example, started out singing in a gospel quartet, and Guitar Slim sang in a church choir as a child. ³ This has extended, of course, to the developments of soul and modern blues from the 1950s on, with Sam Cooke, Johnnie Taylor, Aretha Franklin, Al Green, and many others beginning in gospel before crossing over to the secular pop world.

The more cynical might be tempted to say those who abandoned blues for preaching were swapping one life of leisure for another. “He [the preacher] and the bluesman looking for the same thing – some money, some chicken, and a nice-looking woman,” Son Thomas noted,⁴ while Son House’s signature tune, “Preachin’ the Blues,” boasts the stanza:

> Oh, I’m gonna get me religion, I’m gonna join the Baptist Church.  
> Oh, I’m gonna get me religion, I’m gonna join the Baptist Church.  
> I’m gonna be a Baptist preacher, and I sure won’t have to work.”⁵

Yet the professions, opposed as they could be, were arguably the two most attractive for black males of a certain generation.⁶ Indeed, each brought its own travails (as did simply being black in the South) and the “prodigal son” bluesmen who returned to

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⁶Charles Keil, Urban Blues (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 148-49. The largest group of professional men in the black community at one time were preachers, who commanded power and respect; see George Brown Tindall, South Carolina Negroes 1877-1900 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1952), 202-03.
the church fold would have brought a special perspective, one that countered sowing
one’s wild oats with an understanding of the real world and evidence of God’s mercy by
way of repentance. It told, as one scholar has written, the “story within the story” from
that of survival to that of redemption, wherein we find “bluesman Adam putting away the
toys of blues life and rising from the fall.”

When it comes to blues and gospel, musical compatibility alone is not enough to
equate one with the other. Many of the musical qualities associated with blues have
defined to varying degrees the larger body of African American sacred and secular music
(all of the following noted as well for strong African retentions). These include: the use
of overlapping call and response; the appearance of neutral tones in a scale, with pitch
flexibility most commonly found in the third, fifth, and seventh scale degrees (i.e., “blue”
notes); asymmetrical rhythms, syncopation, and overall rhythmic complexity; the
structural cohesion provided by short, repeated melodic, harmonic and/or rhythmic
phrases, i.e., riffs; harmonic parallelism such as the use of parallel thirds, sixths, and even
fourths; manipulation of timbre to allow vocal and instrumental effects such as falsetto,
groaning, buzzing, stomping, and scraping; bodily movement and the relation of music to
dance; tendency toward variation and improvisation; acceleration of tempo as a trait that
can provide added excitement and a sense of participation; an open-ended aesthetic that
encourages allusive language as well as contrastive sounds, ideas and terminology, often

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7Idem; also see, for example, Jeff ToddTiton, Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural

8Jon Michael Spencer, “The Prodigal Sons of Blues: Parable of the Prodigal Son, Part 1,” Living
through the intersense modalities of terms such as “hot” and “cool”; and the contextual function of music as it relates to social, religious, work, and other activities.\(^9\)

Such cohesiveness of sound often applies to black sacred and secular song alike when they are addressed on a musical level alone. Folklorist Harold Courlander noted a plaintiveness shared between blues and gospel, especially in the music of the guitar evangelists, singling out Blind Willie Johnson’s haunting rendition of the hymn “Dark was the Night, Cold Was the Ground” by stating: “one is not immediately aware that he is hearing an expression of religious feeling. Marked by humming, moaning, foggy voice, and tones resembling those of the accompanying guitar, the rendition fulfills all the requirements of blues singing at its best”\(^10\) (and it might be worth considering that for a certain generation of musical evangelists often relegated to testifying – and surviving – on the street, the vagaries of such a life found complement through musical ambiguities typically thought of as belonging to the blues).

A song such as “O Lord, Search My Heart,” for example, might be considered a blues in gospel clothing thanks to the prevailing use of dominant seventh chords for its harmony (I7, IV7, bVI7, and V7), its blues-patterned turnaround, and the cascading blues-inflected triplets that Davis likely modeled after his onetime string band buddy

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Willie Walker, specifically in the latter’s number “South Carolina Rag.” This was the kind of gospel music that beginning in the 1960s prompted such writers as Robert Shelton of the New York Times to label Davis’s music as holy blues, that is, gospel songs cast in blues structures, which has remained to this day a convenient if somewhat misguided summation of Davis’s religious oeuvre.¹¹


Example 6.2. Willie Walker, descending triplet scale in “South Carolina Rag.” Track time 2:31-2:36. Taken from Gary Davis Style: The Legacy of Reverend Gary Davis (Inside Sounds ISC-0508, 2002); original recording 1930, Columbia 14578-D. Walker’s guitar only (a second rhythm guitar has been omitted). Walker played his guitar here in what sounds like an open position C chord capoed up five frets.

But the 16-bar AAAB stanza structure of “O Lord, Search My Heart” is deeply gospel, as is the lyrical conceit, which is why no amount of bluesy phrasing or intonation would ever be called a blues if the words indicate otherwise. Fred McDowell might have

utilized similar slide guitar riffs in “Shake ’Em on Down” and “Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning” but the songs’ lyrical sentiments – one filled with lusty abandon, the other with moral resoluteness – couldn’t have been any more polarized; the same could be said of someone like gospel great Cleophus Robinson’s nephew Boyd Rivers, who retained the blues-schooled language of Robert Petway and Tommy McClennan on his guitar as a performer of religious song.¹² Even more overt was Robert Wilkins’s recycling of the same guitar accompaniment in “That’s No Way to Get Along” for “Prodigal Son” when, years later, he had become a devout minister in the Church of God in Christ (though the themes of the wayward son in the first and the son who returns in the second fundamentally connect the two beyond having the same musical foundation).¹³

The combining of familiar secular song with sacred words is itself a longstanding tradition in American religious music extending back to camp meetings and the earliest shape note hymnals, popular song being one effective way to readily teach and involve a person or persons in the singing of a religious text. A version, for example, of the spiritual, “The Old Ship of Zion,” collected in North Carolina was played with banjo and strummed to the tune of “Coming Round the Mountain” (itself arguably having roots in the spiritual).¹⁴

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The great Piedmont blues player John Cephas insisted that the musical bedrock for blues and religious song in the African American community was essentially the same, observing: “Musically, there is no difference whether you was playing it in a brothel, in your home, or in the church, the music was all the same. The only difference was the lyrics. Musically it was all the same. I know when we used to start having house parties and what not like that, we’d sing just them raw blues, get-down, wanna shoot my baby or have a good time or anything, and then turn right around in the same setting and play religious music. It was all a part of it, you know.”\footnote{John Cephas, interview by author, 16 July 2008, Davis & Elkins College, Elkins, West Virginia, digital recording.} He also went on to explain that even philosophically the two types of music were arguably more connected than most were willing to admit. Both addressed what he calls “true-to-life experiences,” after all, just from different perspectives.

A lot of people make it sound like there’s such a difference between religious music and blues music. It ain’t that much as far as in the black community. They did both and enjoyed both, you know. But then you had some extremists in there like the holy and sanctified church. But in the Baptist church and Methodist church in the black community, man, it didn’t make no difference. It didn’t make one bit of difference at all. You take some of them charismatical holy and sanctified, they was only holy and sanctified in appearance. But shit, you close them doors and let that sun go down, it wasn’t like that, no indeed. And ain’t no sense in nobody trying to fool themselves about that neither.\footnote{Ibid.}

Yet in spite of any and all shared qualities, none of the above commentary suggests that blues and gospel song were ever confused with one another. Thomas Dorsey intimated as much when he said, “There are moaning blues that are used in
spirituals, and there are moaning spirituals that are used in blues.”\textsuperscript{17} Traditional musician Sparky Rucker said his family’s church in Knoxville, Tennessee, was so intolerant of the blues, they forced out vaudeville blues star Ida Cox, who was a member. “My grandfather was bishop of the Church of God Sanctified,” says Rucker. “Two of my uncles were preachers in that church. They thought of blues as being the devil’s music. They kicked Ida Cox out of [that] church.”\textsuperscript{18} And here a little background on the dichotomous nature of the two genres might help set the stage for Davis’s relationship with each.

As mentioned, the foremost distinction between blues and gospel is the lyrical content. Intent is at the heart of the matter, wherein blues may comment on and even condone the very things that the church rails against to the extent that blues became associated, in the blunt words of Johnny Shines, with sex, murder, gambling, and getting drunk.\textsuperscript{19} Texas-born bluesman L’il Son Jackson put it this way: “It’s a two-sided road and you on the wrong side all the time. A man who’s singing the blues – I think it’s sin because it cause other people to sin.”\textsuperscript{20}

The Saturday night/Sunday morning context for each was also different. Where blues was the soundtrack of the juke, tavern, and house party, religious music took its aim inside the unsullied walls of the church, though members of the community might have


\textsuperscript{18}Sparky Rucker, interview by author, 9 July 2008, McDaniel College, Westminster, Maryland, digital recording.


\textsuperscript{20}Paul Oliver, Conversations with the Blues, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 177.
frequented both. And this addresses another divisive element: the bluesman and the preacher competed, on a certain level, for the same audience. With a shared bag of rhetorical and musical traits, the two vied for the attention of their community, offering not only opposing views of life but opposing solutions to one’s problems, and presenting their case in contrasting “pulpits,” if you will, that fought over “the community’s allegiance, dollars as well as souls.”

The preacher, who was many things to the black community – orator, politician, social, communal and religious leader – might, in fact, have displayed further hostility toward the bluesman for the latter’s perceived threat to the status quo.

Such distinctions get at the very nature of each music’s function. Where religious music from spirituals to later gospel forms promoted a subservient relationship with a higher being, blues promoted a reliance on self, one meeting the needs of the group, the other meeting the needs of the individual. Wrote John F. Szwed, “Church music is directed collectively to God; blues are directed individually to the collective.”

Blues and the old vanguard of Southern black religious music provided two differing worlds of escape, the church being one of the few places where blacks could be totally accepted (unless you sang blues, of course) versus the alluring life of the bluesman, which didn’t need the acceptance of anyone for validation, and whose music served to ease the transition from a settled, agrarian society to one that was more mobile in its wage-laborer urbanism.

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22Ferris, Blues from the Delta, 83.

A number of similarities have nonetheless been pointed out, especially with regard to vocal and rhetorical styles of the bluesman and preacher. These would include:

a) a similar approach to language, emphasizing the use of down-home everyday vocabulary, idioms and slang;
b) direct personalized treatment of the material;
c) impromptu, improvisatory delivery with the building of tension for emotional impact;
d) unusual, emphatic vocal effects such as falsetto and moaning;
e) call and response between preacher/congregation and blues singer/instrument respectively; and
f) the ability to fuse the comic with the serious in a complex, contradictory view of life.24

“The ironical fact to be observed about them,” wrote John W. Work of the Southern folk sermon, “is that they are exactly like the idiom in many blues, which the church attacks so scornfully.”25 States Mark Humphrey, “For bright and artistic black men of the Depression-era Delta, the roles of preacher or performer of social music were the primary alternatives to agrarian indentured servitude, and the personality traits that contributed to success in either role were similar in this environment.”26 It just so happened, to expand on Albert Murray’s thought, that they staged their purification rituals in differing locales.27 Nonetheless, the bluesman and preacher came to terms with suffering and loss in a similar fashion through artfully expressed, life-affirming resilience

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26 Humphrey, “Holy Blues,” 132.

that made both spokesmen for their community.\textsuperscript{28} The spiritual, if not ministerial, implications of her profession were not lost on Alberta Hunter, for example, who commented: “To me, the blues are almost religious . . . almost sacred – when we sing the blues, we’re singing out of our own hearts . . . our feelings . . . Maybe we’re hurt and just can’t answer back.”\textsuperscript{29}

Still, at its core, blues is an egocentric medium. It arose in the post-Reconstruction period roughly between 1890 and 1910 when black America as a whole had to come to terms with the reality that entrée into the mainstream was not going to happen as promised, that blacks instead had been systematically shut out of the country’s economic, political, and social dialogue via Jim Crow laws and segregationist practices, not to mention the overt threat posed by physical intimidation, acts of violence, and murder. The message could not have been more obvious and plain: freed blacks were indeed free, just free to find their own, unassisted way in the world. Remarkably, a number of new musical genres emerged as a result, from blues and ragtime to jazz and gospel music, each touting various degrees of self-reliant expression, from the solo performer role of much blues to the individual relationship with God as touted in the many Pentecostal songs of the era. Spread by the rural musicians who often came from sharecropping and subsistence farming backgrounds, blues reflected a population in flux, those who had made their way from the South to the North, from country towns to energized cities, in an effort to eschew poverty, racism, and the harsh realities of agrarian life. Meeting the

\textsuperscript{28}Ferris, \textit{Blues from the Delta}, 79-80.

needs of this new life (one with its own set of harsh realities) was blues, a music that spoke to the resilience of the individual as someone who relied on his or her own wits to survive. We could even say that the itinerant-focused and conflicted themes of blues were not about country life so much as the desire to escape it.

Black American religious music has for centuries maintained its own resilience and adaptation, and, in certain areas such as opposition to secular music, has even worn the moral cloak of white evangelical missionaries beginning with the First Great Awakening. While the slaves’ former African religious beliefs would have allowed and even welcomed the coexistence of spiritual and moral ambiguity – a spirit figure such as the Yoruba-spawned Eshu, for example, is more than mere trickster but a deity that stands as gatekeeper between the physical and spiritual worlds, acting as a unifier of opposites – the formation of African American churches beginning in the late eighteenth century adopted more than the outward trappings of Anglo-American worship and belief. Certain moral attitudes also appear to have come from evangelical whites, such as the forbidding of dancing and performance of secular music (notions that would have served a dual purpose in the minds of the slave owner, who had placed his own ban on African dance and instrumentation to avert the potential for insurrection).


31Epstein, Sinful Tunes, 58-59, 207-213. Such arguments are not the exclusive domain of Anglo and African American churches but have been bandied about for centuries, as far back as the earliest days of Western Christianity, which forbade musical instruments and dance due to their association with pagan rituals – see Donald Jay Grout and Claude V. Palisca, A History of Western Music, 4th ed. (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1988), 34-35.
Superstitious beliefs as found in both black and white folk traditions reinforced the divide, where the playing of stringed instruments such as fiddles and (later) guitars, was often linked with devilish guidance to the point that bluesmen became aligned with voodoo and supernal powers. Some bluesmen even played up the allegiance, notably Tommy Johnson and, perhaps more comically, Peetie Wheatstraw, a.k.a. William Bunch, who billed himself as both the “High Sheriff of Hell” and the “Devil’s Son-in-Law”; and if the church indeed needed any more cause to decry blues music, such practitioners would have given the righteously faint of heart plenty over which to pontificate.

Yet on another level such concerns were justified. Since the late eighteenth century, the Christian church has been the institutional backbone of black America, second only to the family unit. Just as the preacher was the de facto figurehead, a leader whose responsibilities extended well beyond spiritual instruction, the church was the rock on which solidarity was built. Black churches such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church even willingly segregated themselves, a move of exclusivity that allowed autonomy and freedom of expression as a result. When the hopes bound to Reconstruction faded, and as Southern blacks, most of whom farmed for a living, discovered that the former plantation slave system had more or less been remolded into sharecropping and the tenant farm, the church and its codifying forms of expression such

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32Ferris, *Blues from the Delta*, 77-78. For a look at how folklore and superstition have been treated in blues lyrics, see also Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 117-37.


as the spiritual and hymn became even more vital to black identity and preservation.  

There’s a reason why the communal sway of the older spirituals, which reinforced the group collective, became the sounding call of the Civil Rights era, something the more autonomous observations of the blues could not. Unlike blues, religious music as a twin symbol of belief and ethnicity became uniquely bound to the collective whole, a “conglomerate of black modes of speech, music, and dance, all, of course, under the influential veil of religion.”

It’s easy then to see why music such as blues would have been viewed at times with disdain by the black church: it put a crack in the armor of black unity, undermining solidarity of the group and threatening to break the bonds that had been so carefully assembled and protected through the doctrines of black church life. Indeed, blues and other secular music were not something to be taken lightly, according to Alan Lomax, who, in his field work with black churches of the Deep South in the 1930s, noted that some religious folk placed a stricter ban on the singing of non-sacred music than on stealing.

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36See Titon, Early Downhome Blues, 3-29, for an insightful look into Southern agrarian economics and social trends at the turn of the twentieth century as they related to the many blacks who worked the land.


39In his field research with Alan Lomax from the early 1940s, John W. Work noted the weakening hold the church had on young people in the Delta. This resulted in such ploys as the “heaven and hell” party, in which a young church member would pay for a ticket that directed him or her to heaven, where ice cream and cake were served, or to hell, where hot cocoa and spaghetti were served and where the kids could play cards and indulge in other “sinful” activities. See Work, et al., Lost Delta Found, 83.

Cincinnati boogie woogie piano master Big Joe Duskin told a story of his minister father, who strongly disapproved of his son’s inclination to play blues (illustrating, in the process, how the two types of song were musically similar).

My dad, he hated blues and boogie woogie. He was a hellfire and brimstone preacher, and he wanted to make one out of me. I said, “Oh Lord, you’re going the wrong way, dad. I’m a bluesman.” (I said that to myself, I didn’t say that to him.) So I played a song that he always loved: “Be not dismayed whatever you do, God will take care of you.” So all the kids was out, and they said, “You gonna play the piano?” I said, “I’m gonna tell my dad I’m kinda sick and I ain’t going in today to church, and I’ll be able to play with you guys. Let me know when he’s getting on that bus, and then when he do that, I know exactly what to do. So the old man said, “Well, ain’t you going?” I said, “Dad, I don’t feel so good. I don’t want to go to church today.” “All right, you stay home. But don’t you get on that piano and play no blues and no boogie woogie.” So when he got on the bus . . . now he never forgets that umbrella. I don’t know why he done that, and he don’t know, he just say he forgot it. I was in there playing like this here [plays a boogie woogie riff]. Then I looked and seen the old man [starts playing a hymn]. Man, that old man beat me so bad. It was a bullwhip he had cut off and started whooping the cows with. And I was holding it. He said, “Turn that whip loose, boy!” I said, “Dad, you remember Bessie [a cow] that you cut ’cross the head when she wouldn’t do what you told her to do?” “Yes, I remember that.” I said, “You ever see her no more?” “No.” And I turned it loose and I was gone. I got a whooping that day, man.41

Bluesmen could be just as vocal in admonishing those who would dare play both.

“Now, I’d be afraid to do that ’cause something bad can happen to you,” James “Son” Thomas said about mixing blues and religious music,42 and while it may sound like

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41Big Joe Duskin, “The Preacher and the Devil’s Music,” on Big Joe Jumps Again! (Yellow Dog Records YDR 1133, 2004), transcribed by the author. Similar stories of switching mid-song from blues to gospel in an effort to fool a disapproving relative abound in blues lore, including one told by Ida Goodson in the film Wild Women Don’t Have the Blues and another wherein a young Josh White and his siblings hurriedly transform a ragtime tune into “Jesus Loves Me” in an effort to trick their mother, as recounted in Elijah Wald, Josh White: Society Blues (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 9.

superstition talking, it also reaffirms the hold that black religious church thought had on almost everyone in the community, even those backsliders and musicians who knew better than to play such secular tunes. Blind Lemon Jefferson, for example, reportedly wouldn’t play blues on a Sunday.\textsuperscript{43} The extended implication was that, not far beneath the existential high stakes a sinner risked in playing blues, was a more immediate and practical consideration: the bluesman, in seeking a heaven of his own, inadvertently testified to the power blues had in undermining the stability of the black community. Son House, who straddled both sides of the fence as a Baptist preacher and bluesman, offered this quote, similar to Thomas’s but one that gleans a deeper dynamic as well: “I can’t hold God in one hand and the Devil in the other one. Them two guys don’t get along together too well.”\textsuperscript{44}

Yet get along they did for a number of bluesmen, especially those caught up in the rediscovery process of the folk and blues revival. Any imposed segregation between sacred and secular song disappeared for the country blues artist, whose original context for the material – whether it was the juke joint or the church – had largely been replaced by the neutral meeting grounds of the folk music festival, university campus, club, and coffeehouse. Still, depending on their denomination, performers might show either willingness or reluctance to program blues and gospel music side by side in concert.\textsuperscript{45} While Baptist-raised performers such as Son House, Skip James and Gary Davis eagerly

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[43]{David Evans, “The Reverend Rubin Lacy,” \textit{Blues Unlimited} no. 42: 5.}
\footnotetext[44]{Julius Lester, “I Can Make My Own Songs,” \textit{Sing Out} 15, no. 3 (July 1965): 46; quoted in Monge, “Preachin’ the Blues”, 228-29.}
\footnotetext[45]{Humphrey, “Holy Blues,” 128.}
\end{footnotes}
dipped their feet in both ponds, C.O.G.I.C. member Robert Wilkins, for example, refused to revisit his secular past.

Davis’s initial exposure to the blues came in 1910, around the time he was based in Greenville playing with Willie Walker, and where he likely heard a South Carolina guitarist identified as Porter Irving play the blues ballad “Delia.” Prior to that, when Davis started playing guitar circa 1903, he claimed there was no such song form as the blues in his region of the state. This is consistent with what we know of the dissemination of blues in Appalachia and the Carolina Piedmont, where it arrived at a later date than in Deep South. Indeed, the most exhaustive collection of African American secular folk song at the time, Howard W. Odum’s survey of tunes from Mississippi and Georgia, published in 1911, suggests that blues as a musical form was still in something of a developmental phase during the years 1905 to 1908 when he gathered his source material.

In tallying Davis’s blues, I have included twelve-bar structures plus other forms such as eight- and sixteen-bar blues (see Table 3 below).


See Howard W. Odum, “Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes,” Journal of American Folklore 24, no. 93 (July-September 1911): 255-94; and “Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes (Concluded),” Journal of American Folklore 24, no. 94 (October-December 1911): 351-96. While the term “blues” didn’t come into use for a genre or particular songs until ca. 1909-1910, that doesn’t mean that blues didn’t exist before then, though it appears that it took at least several decades leading up to the twentieth century for the form to take full shape and spread from its likely origins in the rural Deep South.

In deciding what was or wasn’t blues, I have adopted a rather expansive definition beyond the usual twelve-bar forms to include an instrumental folk, or blues, rag “Twelve Sticks,” and the “blues ballad,” “Delia,” but also songs with strong blues-like cadences, structures, and lyrical qualities in the use of first person and non-narrative observations. With that in mind, a song such as “Mama, Let Me Lay It on You,” while an eighteen-bar tune in Davis’s hands with a half cadence straight out of vaudeville pop, is nonetheless considered a “blues” here in the looser sense, a type of AB + refrain lyric with strong blues
sentiment in the lyrics. Likewise, a few others were not considered blues, including Blind Blake’s “That’ll Never Happen No More,” which is perhaps better thought of as a pop song with elements of ragtime and blues.
### Table 3: Blues Songs of Reverend Gary Davis

(*=partly sung/partly spoken; C=concert; S=studio/video; P=party/informal gathering; H=home/lesson/private setting/songbook; ST=street)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song</th>
<th># Performances + Setting</th>
<th>Blues Form (music/words)</th>
<th>Instrumental</th>
<th>Words</th>
<th>Sung</th>
<th>Key</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. “All Night Long”</td>
<td>1C</td>
<td>12-bar, aaB</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. “Blues”</td>
<td>1H</td>
<td>12-bar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. “Blues in A”</td>
<td>1H</td>
<td>12-bar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. “Blues in E”</td>
<td>1H</td>
<td>12-bar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. “CC Rider”</td>
<td>1C</td>
<td>12-bar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. “Cocaine Blues”</td>
<td>10 (6H, 3C, 1S)</td>
<td>8-bar, aaB</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. “Crow Jane”</td>
<td>1S</td>
<td>8-, 12-, 16-bar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. “Delia”</td>
<td>3 (2P, 1C)</td>
<td>12-bar, aaB</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2*</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. “Eagle Rocking Blues”</td>
<td>1S</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Em</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. “Florida Blues”</td>
<td>1H</td>
<td>12-bar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. “Goin’ to Chattanooga”</td>
<td>1H</td>
<td>8-bar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. “Hard Waking Blues”</td>
<td>5 (3H, 2S)</td>
<td>12-bar</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. “Hesitation Blues”</td>
<td>8 (4H, 2P, 1S, 1C)</td>
<td>12-bar, aaB/B</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Am/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. “Horse Thief’s Blues”</td>
<td>1H</td>
<td>12-bar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. “Ice Pick Blues”</td>
<td>6 (5H, 1S)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. “Improvisation: Fast Blues in A”</td>
<td>1H</td>
<td>12-bar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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1In this table, I have consolidated the more detailed song context legend in Appendix 3, essentially delineating here between blues performances tailored for public and private consumption. See the appendix for additional information. Songs without quotes indicate unissued performances identified only by key. Songs with the occasional vocal interjection but absent of true stanzas material are considered instrumental.

2Davis used all three bar forms in his one documented version of the song.

3This is the Ralph Willis number, recorded ca. 1952 (Krazy Kat 824).

4A.k.a., “Cross and Evil Woman Blues.”
<p>| | | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17. “Mama Let Me Lay It on You”</td>
<td>5 (2C, 1S, 1H, 1P)</td>
<td>18-bar (8+10), ch: AABA v: aaBA</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. “Mountain Jack”</td>
<td>16 (8H, 4C, 2S, 2P)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. “Piece without Words”</td>
<td>2 (1H, 1P)</td>
<td>12-bar</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. “Penitentiary Blues”</td>
<td>1H</td>
<td>12-bar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. “Rag Blues in C”</td>
<td>1H</td>
<td>12-bar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. “Rockin’ Chair Blues”</td>
<td>1P</td>
<td>8-bar, aa</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. “St. Louis Blues”</td>
<td>1H</td>
<td>12-bar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. “Seven Sisters”</td>
<td>2H</td>
<td>12-bar</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. “Slippin’ Till My Gal Comes In”</td>
<td>2H</td>
<td>12-bar</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. “Slow Blues in E”</td>
<td>1H</td>
<td>12-bar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. “Spoonful”</td>
<td>3 (2C, 1S)</td>
<td>8-bar, aB</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. “Sportin’ Life Blues”</td>
<td>1H</td>
<td>8-bar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. Talking Blues in E</td>
<td>1P</td>
<td>Rift/talking</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. “Twelve Sticks”</td>
<td>14 (5C, 3H, 3P, 2S, 1ST)</td>
<td>8-bar blues rag</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31. “Walkin’ Dog Blues”</td>
<td>8 (3H, 2P, 2C, 1S)</td>
<td>12-bar</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. “Wall Hollow Blues”</td>
<td>4 (3H, 1P)</td>
<td>12-bar</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. “West Coast Blues”</td>
<td>2H</td>
<td>16-bar blues rag</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. “Whistlin’ Blues”</td>
<td>3 (2C, 1S)</td>
<td>12-bar, talking</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35. “Whoopin’ Blues”</td>
<td>1H</td>
<td>12-bar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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5A.k.a., “I’m Throwing Up My Hands (Ain’t Gonna Work Here No More)”.

6Though the song as written by W.C. Handy is technically more of a rag with a blues strain, that blues section of the tune is what Davis focused on in his impromptu performance for Ernie Hawkins.
As the above chart indicates, Davis’s blues performances were both less and more than expected. They comprised slightly more than a third of the total body of his documented secular output (35 of 102 tunes, or 34%), which might seem slight, especially when compared with such East Coast peers as Blind Blake and Blind Boy Fuller, whose recorded repertories were predominantly blues. That figure becomes even more miniscule when held against Davis’s overall sacred-secular tally of 223 documented tunes, blues being only 15.70% of this known repertoire. Still, blues are also the largest sub-category of secular song by Davis, whose song types consisted as well of marches; ragtime numbers; songs of string band, circus, and traveling show origin; songs of the vaudeville stage, jazz, and popular song; and the odd classical and modern folk number (Mendelssohn’s Wedding March and Bob Dylan’s “Masters of War” respectively). Of course, such categorization is somewhat arbitrary since blues forms and songs circulated within most of the above genres and song contexts, from the popular stage to the rural house party. To quote Harold Courlander: “There are some songs which we are inclined to call blues because there is no other category for them. Ballads or worksongs rendered by singers in blues style become, for the sake of convenience, blues. But we must recognize that the outer boundaries of some song forms overlap other forms.”

Davis’s blues in particular were an overlapping nexus of traditional, vaudeville, and commercial record traditions, “Florida Blues” being but one example. Davis never recorded the tune commercially, though it has since become something of a staple among devotees, thanks to Ernie Hawkins and Andy Cohen performing it (it has also entered the repertoire of country musicians beginning with a fiddle version recorded in 1937 by

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50 Courlander, Negro Folk Music, U.S.A., 141-42.
Fiddlin’ Arthur Smith). The song – which made its recorded debut in 1916 performed by Prince’s Band for Columbia – was co-written by Jacksonville clarinetist/saxophonist William King Phillips, who had joined W. C. Handy’s Bluff City band around the time of “Memphis Blues.” Knowing a hit when he heard it, Handy published the song in 1917 in what became one of William Grant Still’s first published arrangements. Many recorded versions followed, including Handy’s own take on it in 1923, though Davis’s folk-blues adaptation likely took his cue from the much more downhome 1926 performance by the Dixieland Jug Blowers (Victor 20403-B).

Within his blues songs, the majority – twenty-five – are twelve-bar structures, six are eight-bar, and there is one each of a sixteen-bar, eighteen-bar, and riff structure. One curious exception is a reading of “Crow Jane” found on his final studio effort for Biograph in which he alternates between eight-, twelve-, and sixteen-bar patterns (with a bVII passing chord thrown in for good measure). Almost all of his instrumental blues are twelve-bar structures, which reinforce the idea that these songs were improvisational exercises of spontaneity and musical pleasure. Of the twelve blues with words, three have the typical twelve-bar AAa blues tercet form (usually referred to as AAB), six operate

\[51\text{Bluebird B-6844; highly personalized, it was either based on the Phillips tune or a possible common source folk variant. Like Davis, Tennessee native Smith also had a version of “Hesitating Blues.”}\]


\[54\text{The sixteen- and eighteen-bar structures consist of eight-bar phrases with musical tags. I have counted the total length since the first eight-bar phrase ends on a dominant, i.e., half-cadence, pushing the final cadence to the end of the completed stanza. One live version found on Demons and Angels of “Spoonful,” which Davis otherwise played as an eight-bar blues, became, after an initial eight-bar stanza, a repetitious series of four-bar V-I harmonic patterns).}\]
around a refrain (three as twelve-bar couplets with refrain, two as eight-bar couplets with refrain, and one eighteen-bar couplet with refrain – the latter, “Mama Let Me Lay It on You,” essentially being two sections, an eight-bar verse and eight-bar chorus with two-bar repeat), one is aa, and two are talking blues. His choice of keys is worth noting as well. Like much of what he did, the highest percentage of his blues was played in C (9 of 35, or 25.7%). However, when we consider all secular songs and their keys (see Appendix 5), the highest percentages of blues are in E and A. All seven (or 100%) of his secular tunes in E are blues, while six of his seven secular tunes in A (85.7%) are blues (by comparison, Davis’s blues in C are one-fourth of all his known secular material in that key). The keys of E and A sit comfortably on the guitar and no doubt allowed Davis a certain improvisational freedom that befitted blues – in the key of E, for example, the open strings of E, A, D, G, B, and E outline notes in a pentatonic blues scale before one string has been fretted. It also explains perhaps why Davis didn’t cultivate more religious/moralizing material in those keys, especially E, where he only played two such songs: “Sun Is Going Down” and “Bad Company Brought Me Here” – and the apocalyptic, death-clad imagery of both of those numbers was well-suited to the darker strains of the guitar set in E, which Davis apparently reserved for his most blues-imbued expression.

Not surprisingly, the themes that emerge from Davis’s blues with words are about as far removed from a Christian perspective as one can get. Like almost all blues, the male-female relationship was the most common theme for Davis (under which were cloaked many other issues and concerns). Davis said as much himself: “Blues come by your condition. Man gets worried about a woman, he sit down and play about it if he can
play. Woman get worried about a man, she sit down and sing about it.” Related sub-themes include infidelity and cuckoldry, as well as violence (including the use of weapons), murder, jealousy, separation, abandonment and forced travel, drug abuse and alcoholism, thoughts of suicide, class distinction and discrimination, victimization, mistrust, worry, helplessness, and overall physical and emotional malaise. In certain tunes, notably “Hesitation Blues,” there was also a great deal of humor, mostly in the form of sexual innuendo.

His first two recorded blues from 1935 are somewhat telling. “Cross and Evil Woman Blues” concerns a lover who is so jealous that she’s capable of murder (“All she wants is a shotgun or razor, ice pick, or piece of pistol she can find.”), while in “I’m Throwin’ Up My Hands,” Davis addresses a woman who has left him, stating:

There is one thing sure do worry me.
There is one thing sure do worry me.
My good gal packed her suitcase, walked off and left poor me.

Lord, Lord, see what a fix she left me in.
Lord, Lord, see what a fix she left me in.
I ain’t got no home, and I ain’t got no friend.

Davis had been divorced a decade before the recording session, and it’s tempting to read into such lyrics the difficulty such separation would have had on a blind man, not to mention the lack of trust fostered by such a predicament (in several interviews, Davis accused his first wife, Mary Hendrix, of infidelity\textsuperscript{56}). Yet even without biographical

\textsuperscript{55} 31:17-31:29 from CD 4 (Appendix 14) of private recording of Gary Davis at Dick Meltzer’s, Detroit, ca. 1964.

\textsuperscript{56} As he told Stefan Grossman, “The truth of it is that I found out she wasn’t my wife but everybody else’s wife. I let her go” (in Grossman, Rev. Gary Davis/Blues, 10). In an earlier interview with Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold, Davis gave further elaboration, saying, “But the day she tole [told] me she
relevance, blues explored truly dark feelings within Davis, who might have been a hardened person without his religious conversion stepping in when it did.

Unfortunately, we have very little in the way of Davis actually singing the blues outside of his two initial performances. Bear in mind, Davis often sang other secular material, such as “Talk on the Corner” or “Candy Man,” but he seems to have drawn a line in the sand when it came to blues, that most secular and religiously-polarized form in African American music for a certain era. Often repeated is the comment that Davis only played blues for his students when his wife Annie had left the room. This wasn’t always the case, and we have many instances where Davis performed a blues in public before an audience. But of his blues-type material, most was played either instrumentally only (82 out of 112 overall recorded blues performances) or with the words spoken (21 of the remaining 30).

Prior to the fame he found courtesy of the folk and blues revival, Davis would have none of singing blues and told Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold as much in a 1951 interview. After playing “Cocaine Blues” instrumentally, he observed, “You don’t have to worry bout the words. You got the song.” She then asks, “Do you think the words are too sinful to sing now?” His reply: “I wouldn’t sing em fur nothin (laughs).”

Reel 3, p. 3, of Davis interview by Harold. Davis finally acquiesced and muttered the words after getting comfortable with her over the course of several interviews. “It’s quite a daring step,” she noted. “For he swore he would never give them to me.” She also noted that the song “ought to bring him in a million dollars” (reel 8, p. 5).
the 1960s, Davis showed reluctance performing blues material. Jorma Kaukonen, for example, didn’t remember Davis playing blues at any of the live shows he saw. When Stefan Grossman prompted Davis for the words to a tune labeled “Wall Hollow Blues,” (possibly referring to the town of Walhalla, South Carolina, in the north-west corner of the state) his answer was telling: “I can’t do [use] the words now.” Another time, Grossman tried to get Davis to sing words to the 1952 Ralph Willis number, “Goin’ to Chattanooga.” The exchange was as follows:

Grossman: Sing the words to it.

Davis: I’ll write it to you, sometime.

Grossman: Ah, come on. Sing it.

Davis: Uh uh.

Grossman (later in the song): Sing one verse. Come on. Please?

Davis: (silence)


60“Goin’ to Chattanooga” on Rev. Gary Davis, At Home and Church: 1962-1967 (Stefan Grossman’s Guitar Workshop 130/1/2, 2010). The boogie-woogie guitar number by Ralph Willis (Krazy Kat 824, ca. 1952) is documented in Jeff Todd Titon, Downhome Blues Lyrics: An Anthology from the Post-World War II Era, 2d ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 160, and can be heard on the compilation East Coast Blues (Collectables COL-CD-5324, 1990). Among the lyrics Grossman so desperately wanted to know:

Why'n you tell me what is that you eat
Make your breath smell like your feets?

and

The old monkey in the briar patch, possum up a tree,
Want these gals to come and whoopee with me.

all sung to the refrain:

I’m goin’ to Chattanooga, I’m goin’ to Chattanooga,
Yea, Chattanooga, I’m goin’ to Chattanooga,
If the boat don’t sink, the train don’t turn around.

New York-based Willis was originally from Alabama and spent time in North Carolina, where he knew Blind Boy Fuller and Buddy Moss (see Chris Smith, liner notes, East Coast Blues). It’s therefore
Still, Davis added words to his blues from time to time, and did so without apparent hypocrisy. Ernie Hawkins talks of Davis’s many loopholes, morally and otherwise, that allowed the Baptist preacher to bend the rules at times, and that would appear to be the case here: blues were okay as long as a) Davis was teaching them, or b) he wasn’t singing them.\(^6\)

Davis explained the difference between teaching and playing the blues in another exchange with Grossman, who had requested “Mountain jack” and “Ice Pick Blues” during an interview. Davis politely declined.

Grossman: You played them once before for me.

Davis: Yeah, but you see I was teaching.

Grossman: Oh, okay.

Davis: I’m not teaching now. You see, I teach boys what they wanna know, but when it come time for a public thing, that’s a different story. See, we have to learn how to take care of ourselves in all, in all things. ’Cause there are some things that you can handle sometimes behind closed doors. Won’t do for the door to be open for those things to get out. A lot of things that hurt because of – there are some people think one thing when it’s another. So that’s why we have to take care of things like that. But anybody come to me and want me to teach ’em things, I teach ’em just what they want to know. My place (is) where they pay me to teach ’em. Then after that, after all that’s over, you understand, there’s no more for me about that.\(^7\)

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Playing the blues without singing them was Davis’s other moral line-in-the-sand. Of thirty-five blues numbers, twenty-three, or nearly two-thirds (65.7%), were played solely as instrumentals. Some of these were blues consistently played as instrumentals whether they had words at one point or not, such as “Walkin’ Dog Blues” and “Hard Walking Blues.” The next category were blues played by and large as instrumentals later in life even though they had initially had lyrics, such as his 1935 blues sides. Finally, a few blues were obvious improvisations, spontaneous outbursts of musicality that, nonetheless, were different enough from his other material to be considered distinct performances if not compositions. Within this category, careful listening shows that Davis favored certain thematic riffs or ideas as springboards into these improvisations. For example, a number of instrumental blues in C can be considered part of a blues family in that key for Davis, with such performances falling into one of three distinct yet related types – what I’ve grouped as “Wall Hollow Blues,” “Hard Walking Blues,” and “Piece Without Words” – plus “Slippin’ Till My Gal Gets In, Partner,” which has similar characteristics played in the key of E.

When Davis did include lyrics, he almost always spoke rather than sang the words, as in “Spoonful” and all versions with words of “Cocaine” and “Hesitation Blues.” In fact, Davis only sang a blues later in life but a handful of times, some seven times that have thus far come to light. Almost all were in private situations such as a 1969 party in Pontiac, Michigan, where, in repartee with an unidentified female, he belted out back to back a sung version of “Mama Let Me Lay It on You” and a spontaneous version of “Rocking Chair Blues” that leaned more toward song than speech. Two other sung blues were recorded privately of Davis for student John Gibbon in a Columbia University
auditorium in the late 1950s. There he offered up sung verses from his 1935 78, “I’m Throwin’ Up My Hands” (a.k.a., “Mountain Jack”) and “Cross and Evil Woman Blues” (a.k.a., “Ice Pick Blues”). Both of these songs remained in Davis’s later repertoire, albeit as instrumental twelve-bar frames upon which to hang improvisational ideas in the keys of A and E. For Gibbon, however, he sang each number for the first and only documented time post-1935, turning the former into a type of AB lyrical form by entering vocally on the second A line, and repeating only the “ice pick” stanza from the latter in something of a spontaneous outburst – an establishment of blues authenticity by the teacher/minister.

Davis also delivered in a half-spoken/half-sung manner the words to the blues ballad “Delia,” including one from a 1970 concert – and, here, Davis might have been more inclined to sing the words since, as a proto-blues ballad form, the emphasis on third-person narrative reduced the full-blown embodiment of action and consequence that a first-person internalized blues performance would otherwise carry. Davis himself made such a distinction, noting that, “Folk music and blues is a whole lot of differences. … Folk music is kind of like a love-trot. It’s telling a story. Talk about the blues, that leads you to the point of where a person is worried about somebody.”

Like “Delia,” the final sung blues shows up late as well, a year almost to the day before he died. Recorded 8 May 1971 at a Jersey, United Kingdom, concert, “Mama, Let Me Lay It on You,” got a particularly buoyant run-through, sung and played with utter ease almost as if Davis had finally achieved the balance between body and soul his music enacted for many others.

To conclude, Davis left behind slightly less than three dozen distinctive blues songs/improvisations and within that, nearly a hundred different performances, yet only two such performances that we know of (or roughly two percent) were ever sung as out-

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63 Grossman, Rev. Gary Davis/Blues, 11.
and-out blues in front of a public audience (and it’s worth noting that neither was the twelve-bar AAa form most often employed for deep blues expression but were of a couplet + refrain type). Should other sung blues surface at a later date, the balance still favors Davis speaking, not singing, such material. This, in turn, indicates not only Davis’s full grasp of the potential moral issues that playing a blues meant for a man of the cloth in African American culture, but of Davis’s care in how, when, and where he shared such songs with others outside of the milieu from which they sprang.

That a musician such as Davis post-conversion wouldn’t go back to the blues was arguably more than a moral or intellectual distinction. For Davis, singing the blues implied *inhabiting* the blues, which was something he could not do after becoming a minister – he was not the same person, after all. True, he continued to favor “bad” habits such as cigars and liquor, and the presence of both pecadillos in informal settings such as house parties where he let down his guard to sing blues was hardly coincidental. John Gibbon observed as much, stating of Davis, “It was hard to get him to sing blues unless he was a little drunk. He said that the Church did not like it and he was supposed to only sing scripture and gospel.”

Speaking the words allowed some navigation around the issue, since an authentic blues performance was all about the sung words, and less so the musical adornment around the words. Yet an emerging body of scientific research also suggests certain aspects of brain function also contribute to the emotional and philosophical commitment entailed in singing a blues. Simply stated, the brain state and

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the emotional state need to be matched when feelings are communicated successfully through music. Writes Daniel Levitin, “Remembering music involves setting neurons that were originally active in the perception of a piece of music back to their original state – reactivating their particular pattern of connectivity, and getting the firing rates as close as possible to their original levels. . . . When BB is playing the blues and when he is feeling the blues, the neural signatures are the same.”\textsuperscript{66} For Davis to perform a convincing blues, he would have to embody the song, so to speak, which would have been facilitated in part by reigniting the neurons of memory when he first learned, performed, and experienced such music, i.e., going in his mind to a place he longer intended to visit perhaps.

I argue that many of Davis’s blues are the least committed of his performances. Indeed, by speaking the words, he guaranteed a certain aloofness from the blues he played in gesture, affect, and content. Despite his statement that he used to be a “blues cat,”\textsuperscript{67} Davis by the time of his “rediscovery” was a bluesman no longer but had long been a Baptist minister, and the two, as many bluesmen have noted, really don’t mix on a fundamental level. An exchange he had with onetime student Larry Johnson also indicates that blues were something of a limiting form for the eclectic musician. Said Johnson, “You know, I really would like to play blues,” to which Davis replied, “Why don’t you want to play guitar?”\textsuperscript{68} Yet Davis appeased his students and folk audiences to an extent. As he said in one concert before performing “Cocaine Blues,” “I’m gonna play


you all what you want now.”\textsuperscript{69} Still, one gets the feeling he wasn’t always comfortable doing it. Rather, the role blues played in his latter-day concerts can be understood through the contextual expectations of audience and performer alike that were created by the folk stage environment/agreement, where, as historian/folklorist Charles Joyner has argued in looking at folklore as a communicative process, a performance is not so much a “direct reaction to a situation but . . . a response made in accord with ideational mediation.”\textsuperscript{70} During the folk and blues revival, such mediation produced and nurtured certain types of artists that met the expectations of what a “blues” performer should be (and we can argue that the often narrow ideological trappings of what constituted authenticity then still shape the marketing of blues today). Applied to Davis, we might say that his assumptions about what his folk generation fans expected from the blues and gospel master shaped to a degree how and what he played in front of such audiences, and the blues – which he maintained and openly shared at times – filled to a large degree that implied understanding between artist and audience upon which his latter-day career was in no small part constructed.

That’s not to say playing blues didn’t serve a purpose beyond the goals of entertaining a crowd and seeking their approval for the guitar evangelist. Davis knew how to use blues to his advantage, and incorporated the form into his concerts as a way to connect with his audience, a way to bring them into his world where songs of religious thought and ministering were waiting. But on a personal level as well, Davis’s moral

\textsuperscript{69}“Cocaine Blues,” Manchester Free Trade Hall 1964 (Document DOCD 32-20-14, 2007).

murkiness about blues and secular song makes sense. Only through submission to a higher power as expressed in religious song coupled with notions of self-determination as fostered in the blues would a blind performer like Davis have been best equipped to not only survive in the real world but find the combined strength of faith and wits to endure what he must have experienced. And, here, comments by chitlin circuit blues star Bobby Rush, whose father was a Baptist minister, could easily apply to Davis: “If it weren’t for the blues, I don’t know whether I could even cope with myself or situations around me. The blues takes you to some place better than the situation you was in. Back in the day when things were rough, we sung and danced in order to make it to the next day. You had nothing to hang onto but the blues.” In addition, Davis’s reintegration of blues sentiment into his working repertoire paralleled the world at large in the Sixties, a time when religious institutions and movements were increasingly concerned with issues of the world and the self, and when the collective voice of gospel had merged with the individual identity of blues in the form of soul music.

That said, when Davis did sing a blues, as in his 1935 classics “I’m Throwing Up My Hands (Ain’t Gonna Work Here No More)” (a.k.a., “Mountain Jack”) and “Cross

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71 Bobby Rush, phone interview by author, 15 June 2009, digital recording. Rush says his father approved of his son’s choice to sing blues since it was about the music and not the lifestyle. “He never told me to sing the blues, but he never told me not to. Coming up where I come up, everybody thought it was a devil music, but my father didn’t say that to me, so that gave me the green light. If he had said, ‘Bobby Rush, don’t sing the blues,’ I probably wouldn’t have did it because I thought it would have been a curse to my career or life.”

72 Many suggestions have been offered for the meaning of the term “mountain jack” including a mountain jackass – see Stephen Calt, Barrelhouse Words: A Blues Dialect Dictionary (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 165 – the horn of a train pulling up a mountain – see Stephen E. Henderson, “The Blues as Black Poetry,” Callaloo 16 (October 1982): 24 – and even a nickname for a runaway slave – see http://www.metafilter.com/21650/Gone-to-Croatan-Hi-Economy. Davis wasn’t the only artist to use the folk-derived expression, which appeared in other recordings such as “How Long Daddy, How Long” by Ida Cox (Paramount 12325, 1925), “Mountain Jack Blues” by Ma Rainey (Paramount 12352, 1926), Leroy Carr’s “How Long – How Long Blues” (Vocalion 1191, 1928), and Joe Evans, “Shook It This Morning
and Evil Woman Blues” (a.k.a., “Ice Pick Blues”\textsuperscript{73}), he did so with absolute authority. Despite the relative rarity of the form in his repertoire, even then, the respect bestowed on him by peers and fans alike as a pioneer and virtuoso of Piedmont blues is warranted, given these performances. Davis’s two examples from that session conform to the phrasal and stanza contours of prewar blues in general as identified by Jeff Todd Titon in his groundbreaking work, Early Downhome Blues.\textsuperscript{74} Specifically, “I’m Throwing Up My Hands” would be considered a variant belonging to what Titon labeled Blues Family I, in which the melody tends to start on the third and descend to the tonic in each of its phrases – which Davis’s does by and large – while “Cross and Evil Woman Blues,” on the other hand, is more aligned with Blues Family IV, beginning as it does on the fifth and moving down to the tonic with slight upper inflection given to the flat seventh scale degree.

![Example 6.3](image)

**Example 6.3.** Melodic contour of the six sub-phrases in “I’m Throwing Up My Hands” as recorded in 1935 by Gary Davis. First, last, highest, and lowest notes are indicated.

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\textsuperscript{73}Other blues singers used the “ice pick” sentiment as well, including Will Shade (“She Stabbed me with an Ice-Pick” (Victor 21725, 1928) and a whole contingent of Texas bluesmen, from Whistlin’ Alex Moore (“Ice Pick Blues,” Columbia 14518-D, 1929), Walter “Cowboy” Washington (“Ice Pick Mama,” Bluebird B6917, 1937), and Black Boy Shine (“Ice Pick and Pistol Woman Blues,” Vocalion 03613, 1937) to the latter-day signature instrumental by Albert Collins (“Ice Pick,” on Ice Pickin’, Alligator Records 4713, 1978).

\textsuperscript{74}Titon, Early Downhome Blues, 137-74, especially 160-66.
Davis’s blues, however, do not exploit the full range of the blues scale, which more often than not was a tenth, according to Titon’s analysis of forty-four such songs.\(^7\) Davis’s performances, by contrast, have the tessitura of a minor seventh ("Cross and Evil Woman Blues") – of which Titon identified only one in his survey – and a third ("I’m Throwin’ Up My Hands") – of which Titon found none. (Davis’s gospel material from his 1935 sessions, on the other hand, explores a much wider range, with eleven of his twelve sacred tunes spanning an octave or more and nine pushing the upper limits of his voice into g’ and a’ – see Table 2.)

"Mountain Jack" especially operates via an effective mix of musical economy and emotional depth. While his guitar work is truly thrilling, filled with fast scalar runs, counterpoint, and harmonic richness, the vocal operates in a less-busy fashion, a tritonic melody deceptively simple and yet arguably as nuanced as his guitar work. A sample verse shows the melody propelled on the off-beat and hanging on the neutral third for much of each phrase.

\(^7\)Ibid., 154.

Of the six sub-phrases in the above AAa lyric structure, Davis begins each with the neutral third, and finishes two with it. In addition, of a total thirty-one notes that he sings, twenty-one are on the neutral third. The resulting musical ambiguity and anxiety compliments the lyric, which states:

There is one thing sure do worry me.
There is one thing sure do worry me.
My good gal packed her suit-case, walked off and left poor me.

As the song’s most emphatic note, the neutral third gets plenty of finesse, with Davis coaxing it toward the major end of the scale, especially at the ends of sub-phrases two and five on the words “me” and “case.” Complementing that, the tonic A note becomes a final verdict (both musically and philosophically) at the end of the sixth sub-phrase where Davis sings it in three ultimatum-delivering eighth notes on the words “left poor me.” The overall effect is one of uncertainty and unease, with the ambiguous third mirroring
the feelings of abandonment and suffering in the lyric, and with the tonic placed where it is most unforgiving and final. However, the penultimate string of thirds prior to the final cadence – sung on the words “walked off and” – also reach toward the major, implying with masterly-handled blues vagary that perhaps Davis is better off without the person who just left.

In later years, Davis offered many instrumental vamps on “Mountain Jack.” Typically, he would single out a female in the audience or room, and sing her name against a guitar line that imitated it in call-and-response fashion, thereby establishing a motif – and motive (to “holler my baby back,” as he sang in the 1935 version) – for improvisations on the twelve-bar piece.

“COCAINE BLUES”

One of his more intriguing blues numbers was called variously “Cocaine Blues” or “Coco Blues,” and is arguably the main song (alongside “Candy Man” and “Samson and Delilah”) upon which much of Davis’s later folk scene reputation rested. It was also a tune made famous as much by his students as by himself with Dave Van Ronk leading the charge. It was the first song both Townes Van Zandt and Keith Richards admitted to learning on guitar, and it was also the first drug song in the repertoire of Bob Dylan, who has performed it several times in his long career, notably at his mid-1990s MTV

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76Davis’s version of “Cocaine Blues” appears on Townes Van Zandt, Live at the Old Quarter, Houston, Texas (Tomato 27001, 1977), and Keith Richards can be heard offering several run-throughs on the bootleg boxed set, Rolling Stones, Voodoo Brew (Vigotone VIGO 147-150, 1995). In a story from the now defunct Halifax, Nova Scotia, newspaper, The Daily News – Bev Lamb, “Love That Riff,” 21 September 2006 – the author and folk music deejay asserted that his brother, Mike Lamb, heard Jack Elliott doing “Cocaine Blues,” and subsequently taught it to fellow Sidcup Art College student Keith Richards; article accessed at http://www.bevlamb.ca/touchstone/origins.html.
Unplugged concert and a 1963 show at London’s Troubadour Club with Eric von Schmidt and Richie Farina (both of whom also recorded it). Of Davis’s ten extant versions (and more surely exist that haven’t yet come to light), five are instrumental and five have words that he delivers in his typically spoken manner. Davis said he learned the song from a carnival show, but that he also gave the song his own musical arrangement. Indeed, “Cocaine Blues” as played by Davis stands alone, even when compared to other songs of a similar nature collected and recorded in the prewar years, beginning with “Honey, Take a One on Me” and “Cocaine Habit” as documented by Howard W. Odum in 1911, and extending through “Cocaine Blues” by Luke Jordan (Victor 21076, 1927), the alcohol-related “Take a Drink on Me” by Charlie Poole (Columbia 15193-D, 1927), “Tell It to Me” by the Grant Brothers (Columbia 15332-D, 1928), “Cocaine” by Dick Justice (Brunswick 395, 1929), “Cocaine Habit Blues” by the Memphis Jug Band (Victor V38620, 1930), and “Take a Whiff on Me” as sung by Lead Belly, Blind Jesse Harris, and Will Starks (all Library of Congress, 1933, 1937, and 1942 respectively).

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80Luke Jordan’s tune contains a line – “Now I got a girl in the white folk’s yard, she brings me meal and I swear she brings me some lard” – that Davis fitted for his rendition of “Hesitation Blues” suggesting some familiarity with that recording.
81Another notable prewar blues number in the same vein would be “Tear It Down” by the Sam Jones-led ensemble King David’s Jug Band (OKeh 8861, 1930), which included the lines: “Just see that monkey whiffing that cocaine/Went upstairs to ring the bell, police in the alley give the cocaine [presumably, “hell”]. Versions of “Cocaine Blues” attributed to Western swing artists T. J. “Red” Arnall and Billy Hughes also circulated in country music circles from the late 1940s on. Essentially a rewrite of the murder ballad “Little Sadie,” Arnall’s adaptation is the song that Johnny Cash and others later covered and which prompted Hank Thompson to release an entire album of such rough and rowdy material, 1958’s
A popular drug of choice by urban and rural America alike at the turn of the century, cocaine was banned only in 1914. In rural communities, white landowners provided the drug as a stimulant to black laborers, and stevedores on the Mississippi River favored it. In collecting variants of songs about cocaine, John and Alan Lomax observed how it made its way up from the brothels of New Orleans into work camps and barrelhouses (and subsequently into blues song notoriety): “Old-timers remember the day in New Orleans when you could buy cocaine and opium at the corner drugstore and when the men in the levee camps used to bum a ‘tab of cocaine’ just as free and easy as they do a chew of tobacco today.” As Will Stark told Alan Lomax of cocaine use and abuse in the Delta labor camps, the drug served to both encourage work and provide release from the same work: “You see, this used to be a kind of outlaw country. When they had saloons in Lambert and these little country places, they’d sell cocaine and everything, and you could buy all you wanted. I ask a feller once, I say, ‘Eph, who use coke on this job?’ He say, ‘All the people on this yard, excusing you-all three or four fellows that just come here lately.’ I say, ‘How does it take effect on you? Does it take you like whiskey?’ He say, ‘Why, you can get drunk with it and you can’t smell whiskey. It make you feel better than whiskey.’”

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83 John A. and Alan Lomax, Folk Song U.S.A. (1947; reprint, New York: Plume, 1975), 369. Such traditional songs about cocaine became commercialized for a time alongside those about marijuana such as “Minnie the Moocher” and “Funny Reefer Man,” and the Lomaxes reported the drug’s popularity in song into the 1930s among college students – see John A. and Alan Lomax, Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly (New York: Macmillan, 1936), 216-18.

84 Lomax, The Land Where the Blues Began, 205.

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Like just about everything else he performed with words (especially in the secular realm), Davis’s lyrics for “Cocaine Blues” relied largely on folk verse, imbued in this case with some striking visual imagery including several color-based rhymes (as in “Met my gal comin’ she’s all dressed in red/She had a .38 Special to kill me dead”85) and one where he apparently addresses his blindness: “This cocaine has done put out all my daylight.”86 In most cases, Davis injected the song’s pathos with a dash of humor, his admonishing realism with a bit of revelry, as if the singer or those around him know the drug is bad for them but they’re going to take it anyway.

All five documented versions by Davis juggle a similar round of verses (see Appendix 11). Most involve rhyming devices of time (as in “I woke up this morning just about half past four,” et al.) and certain scenarios, the two most prominent being a) a plea to run for help, and b) being variously attacked, beaten, or run off by one’s significant other. Yet of forty-one total verses, roughly three-fourths are either entirely different from one another or different enough through the use of substitute words and phrases within a common pattern (i.e., “come in one morning”) to be considered separately generated verse. In two performances, he places himself essentially as a witness to the events, though the prevailing portrait is that of Davis as victim: to the drug, to women, and to other forces beyond his control. Of more than forty verses, only five offer a direct challenge to the image of the abuser as pathetic, ineffective, and passive. Twice he offers somewhat moralizing advice that listeners “ought to be like me/Drink good corn whiskey,


let that ol’ cocaine be,”

and twice he takes matters into his own hands, warning in one performance, “Look here woman, the way you done me it ain’t gonna do/If you don’t do no better I’m gonna have to get rid of you,”

while in another he is one who threatens to leave – “One of these mornings, it won’t be long/You’re gonna wake up and call for me and I’ll be gone.”

Only once, however, does he wallow in the hedonistic effects of the drug, observing, “I can have it on the floor, I can have it on high/If I had wings I could begin to fly,”

and given that most of that particular performance takes place from the perspective of his companion, who warns at one point that “this cocaine is about to make me dirty,” we can assume that the final thoughts are perhaps by his paramour as well, who is lost in the high of the drug and ultimately is disconnected from the world and her lover.

Davis even introduced one reading by suggesting “love is the drug” (to paraphrase a 1970s hit song by rock band Roxy Music), i.e., that cocaine was a metaphor for the intoxicating (and negative) effects that love can have on a person, including, to judge from his lyrics, unhealthy attachments and enabling behavior, jealousy, rage, and even attempted murder. As he explained: “Sometime we, our brains gets filled up with cocaine and they ain’t, ain’t had took nary a sniff. Sometime you get tied up in love, you understand, you got cocaine aplenty, don’t have to snuff none. Ain’t that right?”

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87 See “Cocaine Blues” on Manchester Free Trade Hall 1964 and Demons and Angels: The Ultimate Collection (Shanachie 6117, 2001). The latter performance can also be found on Blues & Ragtime (Shanachie 97024, 1993).

88 From Blues to Gospel (Biograph/Shout! Factory DK 34007, 2004).

89 From Demons and Angels.

90 From I Am a True Vine.

91 “Cocaine Blues” on Demons and Angels.
Preceding metaphor aside, the overall effect from Davis’s lyrical performances of “Cocaine Blues” was that of a spiraling-down life, and perhaps a minister’s hand was behind his most infamously secular tune, after all.

One rendition in particular reinforces this thought, a performance that stands out as his most sobering (so to speak). In a run-through released by Stefan Grossman on the 1974 LP *Let Us Get Together*, Davis – by using a fair amount of the same verse found in other renditions – nonetheless reordered and edited the anecdotal information into a carefully detailed account of cocaine’s addictive aftermath. In short order (the song clocks in around three minutes), he lays out such side effects as impotence (or at the very least, stupor, though Davis’s love of double entendre leaves little doubt as to the meaning behind this first verse), disruption of the household, the threat of violence and death, paranoia, insomnia, eviction, and general physical and emotional malaise.92 If ever a “scared straight” song existed in the folk blues, this might be it. Even if he didn’t try cocaine himself as a young man (and Davis intimated he didn’t, though Ernie Hawkins, who knew him extremely well, thinks he probably did experiment back in the day93), Davis certainly would have known others who did and would have witnessed the addiction firsthand. As he recounted in one live performance: “Way back yonder when I was a child, I’d been hearing tell of cocaine ever since I been knowing what, what drinking was. Used to be, they’d tell me, when they’d sniff cocaine, they’d put it on the

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92 One verse not found here that shows up on a reading from the cassette-only release *I Am a True Vine* is perhaps the most shocking for its scatological matter-of-factness. Sings Davis in a version yet to see the light of digital day (and even he chuckled after realizing what he had uttered): “Come in late one night my gal was having fits/Said this cocaine is just about to make me shit/Cocaine has done got all around my brain.”

point of a knife, you understand, and sniff it up their head, you understand – they had the biggest kind of drunk.”

Unlike the bravura of Luke Jordan or even the Memphis Jug Band, Davis hardly glorified the drug’s use, even in his most whimsical settings – though in one performance of another song, “Little Boy, Little Boy, Who Made Your Britches?” he tossed off the rather ambivalent lines (shocking in the midst of a children’s tune): “Got a whole lot of rambling. Well, cocaine on my mind.” But within settings of “Cocaine Blues” itself, he never came close to the often carefree perspective reflected by others, a tone that “celebrates the good life attained through inebriation,” as Sean Killeen writes about Lead Belly’s interpretation of “Take a Whiff on Me”: “The images are mostly pleasure providing: love-making, tobacco use, idealized beauty, inexpensive narcotics. Furthermore, Lead Belly tells us he’s in charge and is setting a new tone urging all to join him. It gives him pleasure to treat everybody.” To Davis, the underlying message in “Cocaine Blues” is that of a warning sign, none more so than that found on Let Us Get Together, with its litany of terrifying consequences.

“Cocaine Blues”

[ Guitar intro x 2 ]

(Spoken: A lot of people don’t know what’s a matter with them sometime, you know, ’cause nobody can along with ’em, you know. But I’m here to tell you, cocaine done got all around my brain.)

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94 Cocaine Blues on Demons and Angels.
96 Sean Killeen, liner notes to Lead Belly, Bridging Lead Belly (Rounder 1151, 1999).
97 Reverend Gary Davis, “Cocaine Blues,” Let Us Get Together (Sonet/Kicking Mule LP SNKF 103, 1974)
Come in one night just about half past ten, you know.
Went to stick my key in the door, and I couldn’t get it in.
Cocaine has done got all around my brain.

Come in one evening just about half past nine.
My g-, my gal got a chair and tried to knock me blind.
Cocaine has done got all around my brain.

What’s that comin’ yonder lookin’ so red?
My gal is comin’ with a gun wantin’ to kill me dead
Cocaine has got all around my brain.

I says some-, run here somebody, won’t you please run in a hurry.
This cocaine has got me worried.
Cocaine has got all around my brain.

Some people don’t know how come they can’t go to bed.
Been out all night long, ain’t slept none yet. This cocaine is giving me a fit.
Cocaine has got all around my brain.

I come in one night, one morning just about half past four.
My gal got a chair, knocked me right on back out the door.
She knows I wasn’t right. Cocaine done got all around my brain.

I said run here, somebody, run here quick.
This cocaine has got me sick.
Cocaine has done got all around my brain. 98

This version also presents a good example of what David Evans refers to as
symmetry in the blues, constructed by the singer through principles of association and

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98 This stanza and similar ones sung by Davis that beseeched the aid of a doctor parallel lines collected by Robert Duncan Bass in South Carolina, particularly:
Run here, Doctor,
Run here quick;
Shortenin’ bread
Done made me sick.
contrast. With or without the guitar breaks factored in, the seven spoken stanzas lay out with somewhat symmetrical logic. Stanzas 2 and 6 become mirror images of each other, revolving around his significant other attacking him with a chair – one in which he is almost knocked blind (an ironic use of the phrase from a blind man), the other in which he is knocked out of the door, both indicating loss of relationship and home. Stanzas 3 and 5 are less obvious mirrors, though the subtle use of the words “red/dead” in the former and “bed/yet” in the latter link the two by rhyme (which doesn’t happen elsewhere); they are also linked through a correlation of his partner and his bed, both no longer available to the song’s drug-addled subject. Likewise, stanzas 4 and 7 are closely related, in each case the singer reduced to seeking the aid of strangers – and with such organizational patterning in mind, the “worried” idea found in the fourth stanza (which is the middle verse of seven when only lyrics are considered but is also the middle verse of eleven when the guitar breaks are factored) might suggest less a state of paranoia or fear than a moment of clarity in which the singer realizes the consequences of his actions – a centrally-placed conceit around a sea of self-destructive behavior.

Noticeably absent, however, are the binary structures Evans also found contained in most blues performances – paired reconciliatory expressions such as self-pity with grandiosity, abuse with praise, and travel with return that act with a sense of myth-like mediation. Here, Davis has no such resolution to fall back on, but delivers a song steeped in one-sided contemplation on the subject where self-pity, abuse, criticism, and

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100 Ibid., 26.
abandonment are all he faces (by contrast, other versions of the “run here” line place his female companion – “woman” or “mama” – as among those who come to his rescue, thereby meeting the expectations of such binary opposites in blues verse). The song fades out just as Davis goes into a statement of the instrumental B section for the first time, so it’s hard to say how much longer, if at all, Davis continued with the song, and we might be careful as a result in assigning too much meaning to structural qualities. He did end another lyric version on the instrumental B section, and yet in others that part never appears. In addition, seven stanzas seems the norm for the song with three of five performances conforming to that length (the other two have eight and twelve stanzas), so in all likelihood, the fade-out happened for mechanical or technical reasons as the song was winding down. Regardless, what Davis performed here is extremely thought-out and poignant, a look at the drug and its manifestations on a user unlike anything else by his peers or himself for that matter.

“DELIA”: A PROTO-BLUES BALLAD

Another song in C with a similar guitar arrangement to “Cocaine Blues” was Davis’s reading of “Delia,” which he identified as the first blues he recalled hearing circa 1910. Though not a blues per se, this enduring ballad, which has been recorded by generations of performers from Blind Willie McTell to Bob Dylan, does have a number of proto-blues traits including its twelve-bar structure and insertion of the singer into the song’s events. A number of popular versions, including those by Harry Belafonte, Josh White, and Johnny Cash, have been based to a greater or lesser degree on the early 1950s

hit “Delia’s Gone” by Bahamian singer Blind Blake (Blake Alphonso Higgs, who fronted the house band at Nassau’s Royal Victoria Hotel, and is not to be confused with the prewar Piedmont blues stylist of the same name who was either from Florida or Savannah, Georgia).

In almost all renditions, the narrative tells of a young girl, Delia, who was tragically shot and killed. Thanks to the research of John Garst, we know that the song, like a number of other such blues ballads that emerged around the turn of the twentieth century, was based in fact. Specifically, on Christmas Eve, 1900, a fourteen-year-old girl from Savannah, Georgia, Delia Green, was shot at a festive gathering by a boy not much older, Moses “Cooney” Houston, who had gone into a jealous rage over her perceived rejection of him, and who ended up serving twelve years of a life sentence for the murder. 102

Songs about Delia began appearing shortly thereafter, with the earliest documented version, according to Robert Winslow Gordon, appearing in 1901, sung to the tune of “McKinley” (a.k.a., “White House Blues”). 103 Howard W. Odum published several verses in 1911 as “One More Rounder Gone,” the same title under which Reese Du Pree recorded it in 1924. 104 Many variants, including those with the title and/or refrain, “One More Rounder Gone,” were collected early on by folklorists. Chapman J. Milling printed three variants, including twenty-three verses by Will Winn, an itinerant


black singer/guitarist from the Southwest who claimed it was composed by white Dallas
minstrel Whistlin’ Bill Ruff, and whose refrain (“All I had done gone”), melodic arc, and
two verses were similar to Davis’s.\textsuperscript{105} Curious as well are the six verses Milling heard by
Lil and Babe McClintock from Clinton, South Carolina, in Laurens County where Davis
was born and raised. Their version shared two verses with Davis – “Delia, Delia, why
didn’t you run?/See dat man a- comin’, had a forty fo’ Gatlin gun” and “Rubber tire
buggy, rubber tire hack/Take you to dat fun’al groun’, don’ never bring you back” –
though their refrain, “Buffalo, sweet Buffalo,” was borrowed from “McKinley.”\textsuperscript{106}

Howard W. Odum documented two versions: three stanzas of a song called “One
Mo’ Rounder Gone,” and more interestingly, twenty-one stanzas of a ballad that borrows
heavily from “Delia” called “Lilly.”\textsuperscript{107} Set in Atlanta with a refrain similar to that used in
Davis’s “Delia” (“An’ it’s all she’s got done gone”), “Lilly” also mixed elements of
“Frankie” (which Odum recognized), notably in the flipping of the murder; in this case it
is the man, Pauly, who is shot and killed by the female, Lilly. In gathering variants of
“Delie,” Newman Ivey White further made the connection with “Frankie,” suggesting a
common source at one point in the development of the two songs\textsuperscript{108} – and while the two
songs have since been shown to have been based in actual, separate events (“Frankie” on
the shooting death of Alan Britt by Frankie Baker in St. Louis in 1899, a year before to

\textsuperscript{105}Chapman J. Milling, “Delia Holmes: A Neglected Negro Ballad,” \textit{Southern Folklore Quarterly}
1, no. 4 (December 1937): 3.

\textsuperscript{106}Ibid., 7-8.

\textsuperscript{107}Odum, “Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes

\textsuperscript{108}Newman Ivey White, \textit{American Negro Folk-Songs} (Harvard University Press, 1928; reprint,
the murder of Delia Green), their circulation at the time showed a strong floating element in shared verse less concerned with factual detail than emotional and poetic weight. As Dorothy Scarborough noted about “Frankie” – and its application to “Delia” is equally relevant – the passion and swift action of the crime is what made the song popular and appealing.109 Indeed, elements of the two had merged so much by the 1930s that two Florida performances recorded by Alan Lomax, Zora Neale Hurston, and Elizabeth Barnicle for the Library of Congress in 1935 were identified simultaneously as both, perhaps reflecting some element of confusion and/or mislabeling by the collectors but also just as likely demonstrating what was perceived at the time as a relation between the songs. These were “Frankie and Albert (Cooney and Delia)” by Booker T. Sapps, Roger Matthews, and Willy Flowers, who clearly sing the Delia ballad; and “Franky and Albert (Cooney and Delia)” by Gabriel Brown with John and Rochelle French, who sing verses more aligned with Frankie:110

As mentioned above, Davis’s “Delia” has a refrain (“Only friend I have is gone”) echoed in other versions, including those by Will Winn (“All I had done gone”), Blind Willie McTell (“She’s all I got and gone”111), and one collected in 1924 by White (“All I done had done gone”) from a Durham, North Carolina, woman who had learned it third-hand “from memory of a song taught Frank Goodell of Spartanburg, S.C., Amherst, ’08, by an old Negro to whom he paid $1.00 to teach him to play the guitar. Learned probably


110Both performances can be found on Field Recordings Vol.7: Florida (1935-1936) (Document Records DOCD-5587, 1997).

between 1900 and 1904.”\(^{112}\) This last bit of information conforms to what we know of the song through Davis’s recollection that a traveling musician in South Carolina, Porter Irving, showed Davis the tune on guitar around 1910, likely in the Greenville area.\(^{113}\)

However, Davis’s version is something of a hybrid and casts Delia as the one who does the killing, a la “Frankie,” with one stanza in particular matching a line from “Frankie” collected in 1927:

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Why don’t you run now, Frankie, oh, Frankie, why don’t you run?
Yonder comes the Chief-of-Police with a forty-four smokeless gun
You’ve killed the man wouldn’t treat you right!\(^{114}\)
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Davis: Delia, Delia, why don’t you run?
Here come the High Sheriff with a .44 Gatlin gun.
Only friend I have is gone.\(^{115}\)

Davis played the song occasionally, including one version released commercially from a 1971 concert.\(^{116}\) His take on the ballad was quickly covered by Roy Book Binder (on 1971’s Travelin’ Man for Adelphi), and to a large extent, Davis’s musical arrangement and refrain combine with McTell’s lyrics to inform Bob Dylan’s studio take, found on World Gone Weary (Columbia 57590, 1993).

Truly special within the Davis canon, however, is a 1969 version of “Delia” recorded at a private gathering. It runs nearly seven minutes with thirteen verses, and

\(^{112}\) White, American Negro Folk-Songs, 215.

\(^{113}\) Grossman, Rev. Gary Davis/Blues Guitar, 10.

\(^{114}\) Ethel Park Richardson, American Mountain Songs (New York: Greenberg, 1927), 39.


although it concerns the story of Delia on a basic level, larger implications emerge about the South, misery, separation, and death. This is a song, after all, about black-on-black crime at a time in America when such violence within the African American community made for sensational headlines in the papers, if it made the papers at all, but otherwise garnered little empathy – something that Davis restores to the lives taken in his account.

“Delia”\textsuperscript{117}

Oh, Delia, how can it be?
You love all the rest of these rounders, you don’t have no time for me.
Only friend I have is gone.

Oh, Delia, how can I rest?
Police riding in the daytime to investigate me, and I’m tryin’ to do my best.
Only friend I have is gone.

I asked Delia, “Won’t you be mine?” What you reckon she said?
She said she wouldn’t have me, doggone my soul, if all the rest of the men were dead.
(Spoken: That’s pretty bad.) Only friend I have is gone.

Police ’rested Delia, put her down in the … jail.
All the friends she run around with, none were able to go her bail.
Only friend I have is gone.

Was lookin’ around in the newspaper, found out what Delia had done.
The man that she was tearin’ it up with, he got married, and she shot him with a .38 gun.
Only friend I have is gone.

They run Delia out to … it was before a cruel judge to be tried.
He give her ninety-nine days [years] and one … Sunday, and you ought to hear Delia cry, boy.
(Spoken: I’d a cried, too, wouldn’t you?) Only friend I have is gone.

I was lyin’ in my bed early one morning, I heard a-something a-ringing all around my head.
That telegram boy with a telegram, he handed it to me, I read it, and it, it read my Delia was dead.

\textsuperscript{117}Reverend Gary Davis, “Delia,” 0:01-6:53 on CD 7 of private recording made at Rowena Reik’s house, Pontiac, Michigan, c. 1969.
Only friend I have is gone.

Taken ol’ Delia down to the cemetery, carried her in a double-seated hack. Put her six feet down in the earth, that ol’ gal could not come back. Only friend I have is gone.

Delia lyin’ in the cemetery, should be drinkin’ out a silver cup. The poor girl is still six feet in the earth, I know the gal couldn’t wake up. Only friend I have is gone.

Looked down on Delia’s grave, I just couldn’t help but cry. I began to pull myself together, I know the poor girl had to die. Only friend I have is gone.

Oh, Delia, Delia, why in the world don’t you run? Here come the high sheriff with a rifle and a .44 Gatlin gun. Only friend I have is gone.

The old sow woke up one morning, she found her pigs all dead. Old sow said to the boar, “Let’s get ready to move our bed.” Only friend I have is gone.

Well, the engineer said to the fireman, put on me a bushel of more coal. For I’m gonna run this doggone engine in some ol’ doggone lonesome hole. (Spoken: He didn’t care, he was drunk.) Only friend I have is gone.

[Guitar break out.]

Certain aspects of the song are consistent with much of the body of blues balladry. It has instrumental accompaniment and is played in a twelve-bar structure. The guitar part, in fact, is quite similar to how he played “Cocaine Blues,” with a loping arpeggiation of the open-position C chord and a G pedal in the bass, though Davis doesn’t reverse the thumb pattern the way he does in “Cocaine” or “Candy Man.” And like much of his secular material with words, Davis tends to half-sing, half-speak the melody, the wisp of a song rendered in an almost confessional manner unlike the fiery vocals he could deliver in his gospel material.
Lyrically, the song is an aa-refrain type (a rhymed couplet with refrain also known as AB-refrain) like other blues ballads such as “Frankie” and “Stagolee.” It is essentially a narrative though not entirely chronological, and the third–person setting is constantly disrupted by first-person assertions, notably the refrain, which takes the story constantly back to Davis, not Delia (curiously, Davis casts himself in the song at times...
almost as if he were Cooney). The lyrical organization can be viewed in symmetrical fashion, four groups of three thematically-related stanzas with a central stand-alone verse in which Delia is dead (something the refrains serve to echo):

Three verses about Davis and his relationship with Delia:

V1. Davis is jealous of Delia’s many lovers.

V2. Davis is pursued by the police (and this could be the reason why Delia will have nothing to do with him, or he has possibly been implicated in a crime – the murder? – involving Delia).

V3. Delia ignores Davis’s advances.

Three verses about the murder/trial:

V4. The police arrest Delia.

V5. Davis reads about the murder in the paper, learning motif.

V6. The judge sentences Delia.

Central verse:

V7. Delia is dead.

Three verses set in the cemetery:

V8. Delia is buried.

V9. Permanence and tragedy of her death sets in for Davis.

V10. Resignation to her death sets in for Davis.

Three verses of reflection/larger implications:

V11. If Delia had run, she might still be alive.

V12. Sow’s pigs are dead (nature suffers) + need to move (impermanence of existence)

V13. Engineer contemplates running train off the rails (society suffers) + ambivalent attitude (live for the moment)
The song is mostly conventional until the last two stanzas, which are striking for their seemingly non-related imagery (yet the lines are hardly spontaneous – Davis carefully placed them in the same order at the end of both documented performances with words. Like many folksongs, a core idea is explored here beyond the surface story. If we accept, as stated previously, that many blues songs exhibit symmetrical structures which belie the surface randomness a blues may have from one verse to the next, then the final verses of Davis’s “Delia” operate within the realm of meta-meaning.

The first eleven verses are concerned essentially with a murder and a resultant second death. The last two stanzas take a curious turn, however. The penultimate verse paints a picture of a sow waking up to find her pigs all dead. For any one who ever tended a farm, as did Davis, this would have been a common enough scenario in which a sow or boar stuck in the same pen might roll over on newborn pigs, thereby suffocating them. In this verse, the sow indicates to the boar that it is time to “move our bed,” suggesting either that a small pen was to blame for the deaths, or now that their babies are gone, there is no reason to stay. Likewise, the last verse is unrelated to the story of Delia but is borrowed it would seem from the body of Casey Jones ballads (based on another tragic event from 1900). In it, an engineer in the throes of despair decides to crash his train into a ditch in a final, impulsive act that at once suggests the specter of death which surrounded the train image in African American tradition (think the famous sermon “Death’s Black Train Is Coming” by Rev. J. M. Gates) and yet at the same time derails, so to speak, one of the most sustaining constructs of escape and freedom for African

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Americans. Yet what do these verses, powerful as they are, have in common then with each other, let alone the main story? All are violent acts, all are senseless, and all can’t be explained away. Yet it’s the way of the world, where the ramifications of two ill-fated individuals extend to the disruption of natural and social order. For a black man emerging from the Jim Crow South as Davis did, such violence would have been a regular occurrence to the point that it became the natural order of things (hence, the image of the sow balanced against the “animal” rage of a crime of passion). The implications in Davis’s “Delia” are truly frightening. Terrible things happen, we are all at the mercy of forces we can’t control, and the only real act of self-destiny is the fit of rage that accompanies resignation of one’s death. Other possible readings within the final stanza: the derailed train as a suicidal act; “coal” as a metaphor for “blackness” and even black labor; and, on a more Freudian level, “coal” representing alcohol and the “hole” intercourse, as if Davis, despondent over Delia’s death, now seeks the detached comfort of drink and casual sex/prostitution — which is still a manner of giving up.

By contrast, Davis’s live version has its own symmetrical structure, one with mirroring outer stanzas reliant on motion imagery and a central image of abandonment (and notice as well how the first guitar break serves to put distance between Davis’s feelings and the actual events).

“Delia”

[Guitar intro x 2]

Oh, Delia, Delia, I cannot rest. I said the police got me runnin’ doin’ my best. Only friend I have is gone.

Oh Delia, Delia, how can it be?
You love all the rest of these rounders, and you don’t care a thing about me.
Only friend I have is gone.

[Guitar break]

Delia, Delia, why don’t you run?
Here come the High Sheriff with a .44 Gatlin gun.
Only friend I have is gone.

Taken ol’ Delia, put her down in the county jail.
All of the friends that Delia seemed to have, none to go her bail.
Only friend I have is gone.

I went to Delia’s trial, they was tryin’ her for her life
Lord have mercy! [he appears to forget the line]
Only friend I have is gone.

Old sow woke up one morning, found her pigs all dead.
She said to the boar, “I’m getting’ ready to move my bed.”
Only friend I have is gone.

Engineer said to the fireman, “Put on a bushel more coal.
I’m gonna run this engine in some doggone lonesome hole.”
Only friend I have is gone.

[Guitar break]

In delineating associative and contrastive symmetries, we can group the stanzas as
below, where the first row represents the song’s perspective, the second row the
interaction that takes place, and the third row the resulting action. I’ve added a fourth row
for the refrain, which becomes a verdict that extends beyond the song’s actual trial. “No
matter what, you’re on your own” is the deeper conclusion Davis returns to time and
again, a very valid if stark rationale for generations of disenfranchised black folk at the
time when “Delia” came to be written, sung, and embraced.
Symmetrical structures also show up in Davis’s 1935 recordings, arguably the two central blues performances of his long career. In “I’m Throwin’ Up My Hands,” the song is organized into eight statements of a twelve-bar structure, four sung and four played instrumentally. Like his gospel material from the same sessions, the performance features as many guitar breaks as sung verses, utilizing, in fact, more solos than even a virtuoso such as Blind Blake would. In part, this could be attributed to the musical personality that was Davis, who advertised his merits through such technical maneuvers. But, as the next two examples show, the placement of guitar breaks within a lyric song contributed as well to overall structure and formal symmetry, helping shape the forces of opposition and resolution that blues scholar David Evans has argued exist within the folk blues. This isn’t to say that such structures exist in all blues – some blues are more thematically organized, for example – nor that those symmetries are always perfect when they do exist – the deep psychological connective tissue of such structures must be weighed, after all, against a quality of spontaneity that defines most blues performances. Structuralist elements nonetheless allow negotiation within the vagaries of a blues lyric/performance just as a convincing blues performance allows negotiation within the vagaries of life for the blues musician and their audience, as in the songs by Davis below.
“I’m Throwin’ Up My Hands”

[Guitar intro]

If I could holler just like a mountain jack,
If I could holler just like a mountain jack,
I’d go up on a mountain, holler my baby back.

There is one thing sure do worry me,
There is one thing sure do worry me.
My good gal packed her suitcase, walked off and left poor me.

Lord, Lord, see what a fix she left me in,
Lord, Lord, see what a fix she left me in.
I ain’t got no home, and I ain’t got no friend.

[Guitar break]

I’m going away to worry you off my mind;
I’m going away to worry you off my mind.
Then I won’t be here wringin’ my hand and cryin’.

[Guitar break x 2]

If we consider the above guitar solos as part of the song’s larger structure, musically and philosophically, a contrastive symmetry emerges. Framed by outer guitar statements – bookends of self-affirming virtuosity – verse one and the penultimate guitar solo become linked by their emphatic outpouring, one vocal and the other a break in which Davis’s fingers slide with frenzied glissando in and out of notes. Next, the second and fourth verses behave in polarized fashion: in verse two, Davis is worried because he has been left, while in verse four he brings an end to his worrying by doing the leaving. Finally in verse three, which begins as an extension of verse two, Davis claims to have no home or support group; this, in turn, is answered by a solo that begins with declamatory triplets in the upper register, one implication being that the guitar is his only true friend/companion. Far from being peripheral or unnecessary, then, the four guitar solos
are ultimately integral to the resolution achieved in this blues performance, which acts out in ritualized tones the kind of self-reliance Davis achieved in real life as a blind man thanks to his extraordinary guitar playing.

Suggested symmetrical structure in “I’m Throwin’ Up My Hands”:

Gt: first statement – identifies song as a blues

V1: emotional outpouring by voice – wants to call back his female companion

V2: worry – his companion has left and he is abandoned

V3: resulting situation – no home or support system

Gt: emphatic break – guitar as only friend

V4: ends worry – by Davis leaving as well

Gt: emotional outpouring by guitar – glissando figures suggest motion, escape

Gt: final statement – ends on tonic, i.e., total resolution

Other types of symmetry can also be found within the performance. Stanzas one through three might be considered a unit where the singer’s future, past, and present conditions are laid out in contrast to stanza four, which is separated from the other verses by a guitar break and finds Davis becoming proactive about the situation; the outer guitar breaks then serve as a frame for the song. This is consistent with David Evans’s observation that instrumental breaks in traditional blues function to separate linked pairs of stanzas or stanza groups. A variation on such an interpretation might be to divide the song in the middle: the first half essentially deals with grief and abandonment, while the last half – three of its four statements being guitar breaks – might be said to deal with picking up one’s boot straps and moving on. In this light, the guitar breaks become

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119 Evans, “Formulaic Composition in the Blues,” 492.
freeing commentary, notably the glissando figures of the penultimate break, which suggest motion and escape (exactly what Davis indicates he has done in the previous verse) and the final guitar statement, which ends not on the flat-seventh scale degree typical of many blues performances – the unresolved, “noncommittal” cadence – but firmly on the tonic, a gesture of purposefulness and resolve.

In “Cross and Evil Woman Blues,” symmetrical structures of a different kind emerge in its nine statements – six verses and three guitar breaks.

“Cross and Evil Woman Blues”

[Guitar intro]

Lord, you women sure do treat me mean;
Lord, you women sure do treat me mean.
Why you treat me just like I was some man that has never been seen.

When you find a woman wake up in the morning with a rag tied around her head,
You find a woman wake up in the morning with a rag tied around her head,
She got a evil mind to kill some poor man dead.

She get up cross and evil and can’t hardly be pleased;
She get up cross and evil and she can’t hardly be pleased.
Nothin’ you can do to please that woman, if you get down on your bended knee.

Don’t a woman feel good and satisfied when she knows she got a man of her own,
Don’t a woman feel good and satisfied when she knows she got a man of her own.
Don’t she feel hot and evil when she knows some no-good woman is helping’ along.

(Spoken: Speak to me.)

[Guitar break]

You get a jealous-hearted woman, she’s a kind of woman that’s hard to quit;
You get a jealous-hearted woman, she’s a woman that’s hard to quit.
If you ever get her on your hands, sure God, never will quit her yet.

[Guitar break]
Lord, when a jealous-hearted woman start to lovin’, she gets crazy, gets out of her mind,
When a jealous hearted woman starts to lovin’, she gets crazy and gets plum out of her mind.
All she want, a shotgun or razor, ice pick, or piece of pistol she can find.

In this case, the symmetry is one that acts like a mirror between the song’s first and second half. In essence, the first three sung verses – a) women treat Davis mean; b) murder is on a woman’s mind; c) a “cross and evil” woman can’t be pleased – offer unexplained behavior, while the last three verses – a) she is “hard and evil” because of another woman; b) it becomes hard to leave a jealous woman; and c) jealousy leads to violence and murder – offers an explanation for the behavior. Again, if we factor in the guitar breaks, an additional structural layer emerges, where the fourth verse becomes the pivotal statement, a distillation of the entire song into one verse that presents both sides of the situation via two contrasting thoughts – trust versus jealousy. Additionally, the repeat of the A line here acts as the centermost line of the whole performance, the one moment where the woman feels “good and satisfied.” This, of course, is the ideal situation and yet a total departure from every other sentiment expressed in the song. Indeed, the fourth stanza’s B line quickly presents a “blues logic” negation of the previous thought, sending the woman back to her “evil” ways, although for the first time we learn why: jealousy because her man has another woman. The subsequent verses, then, act to explain/justify such arbitrary behavior within Davis’s own relationship in addition to his enabling role (“she’s the kind of woman that’s hard to quit”).

Suggested symmetries in “Cross and Evil Woman Blues”:

Unexplained behavior
| V1: women treat Davis mean  
| V2: a woman has murder on her mind  
| V3: a “cross and evil” woman can’t be pleased

Explained behavior
| V4: A: a woman gets “hard and evil” because of another woman  
| V5: it becomes difficult to quit a jealous woman  
| V6: a jealous woman is capable of violence and murder

or (with guitar breaks included)

Arbitrary, unexplained behavior
| Gt  
| V1: women treat Davis mean  
| V2: a woman has murder on her mind  
| V3: a “cross and evil” woman can’t be pleased

Middle stanza laid out as opposites of trust and jealousy
  A: a woman feels good and satisfied with her own man  
  V4: A: repeat of above but as central line of entire song  
  B: she gets “hard and evil” because of another woman

Which explains behavior by female and Davis
| Gt  
| V5: it becomes difficult to quit a jealous woman  
| Gt  
| V6: a jealous woman is capable of violence and murder

As a final thought on Davis and the blues, when we consider African American song as a form of history, where cultural identity and meaning emerge through, in the words of Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., “translation of the memory into sound and the sound into memory,”

\[120\] this may go some way in explaining the resilient hold secular music had on Davis, especially post-conversion. While, as a Christian, he may have rejected the sinful shell of his former self, he nonetheless found a way to welcome aspects of his entire life

experience into his born-again being, in which secular song became part of the transcendence if only because he was finally at a place (the North, New York City, the 1960s) where he was free to express such song if so inclined. In writing on the nature of African creative expression, the thoughts of Lawrence Levine resonate beyond cultures such as the Ashanti and Dahomean to Davis’s time and situation: “In Africa, songs, tales, proverbs, and verbal games served the dual function of not only preserving communal values and solidarity, but also of providing occasions for the individual to transcend, at least symbolically, the inevitable restrictions of his environment and his society by permitting him to express deeply held feelings which he ordinarily was not allowed to verbalize.”121 So imagine the thanks Davis surely gave his God for living to see the day when he could sing a “wicked” song such as “Cocaine Blues” before a white audience and not only be paid for it but be celebrated for it – to quote James H. Cone, the “transformation of black life through the sheer power of song” indeed.122


CHAPTER VII

“KITTY WENT A-COURTIN’”: BANJO, HARMONICA, AND PIANO

Because Reverend Gary Davis’s skills were so formidable on the guitar, it’s understandable if his talents on other instruments – namely the banjo, the harmonica, and the piano – often go ignored. Davis knew how to play all three with considerable ability, was recorded doing so a number of times, and he blew “harp” with regularity in his live shows. Given the importance of non-blues forms and instrumentation on Davis’s style, his working knowledge of the banjo, harmonica, and piano becomes an additional window into his rich turn-of-the-century musical palette, as well as suggesting how these instruments expand our understanding of Davis the guitarist.

BANJO

The banjo and harmonica predated the guitar in Davis’s musical training. In more than one interview, he said he learned harmonica at five, banjo at six, and guitar at seven. According to Davis, the first instrument he ever owned was a banjo given by a stepfather who must have sensed latent talent in the child, given Davis’s preoccupation assembling ad hoc stringed instruments. Said Davis: “Every time he come into the house, I had done sat down and string up pieces of string on a board, or something like that. Put a bridge and be picking on it.”

1Reverend Gary Davis, interview by Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold, April/May 1951, TMs (photocopy), the Alan Lomax Archive, New York City, reel 1, side 2, p. 1. In a 1968 interview with Samuel Charters, however, Davis said the first instrument he learned was “an old banjo . . . I was just going up and down, plunk a lunk, plunk a lunk, plunk a lunk, I thought I was doing something playing that banjo”; Sam Charters, “Reverend Gary Davis,” in Stefan Grossman, Rev. Gary Davis/Blues Guitar (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972), 5-7.
Such industry was common enough in Southern rural culture of the United States, black and white alike (not to mention cultures the world over), existing as part craft and part practicality for the poor and geographically isolated, who often couldn’t afford or easily obtain commercially-manufactured instruments. The handcrafting of banjos, for example, has been documented for centuries. One account by a former Virginian slave noted how “we generally made our own banjos and fiddles. . . . When we made a banjo we would first of all catch what we called a ground hog, known in the north as a woodchuck. After tanning his hide, it would be stretched over a piece of timber fashioned like a cheese box.”

Jug band musician Gus Cannon, for example, recalled making his first banjo from a guitar neck and tin bread pan. It was also normal to find cigar boxes used for fiddle and guitar bodies, milk jugs for the inlaid purfling of a fiddle top, and even corn stalks for both the fiddle and bow well into the twentieth century in rural areas. The father of black string band musician Howard Armstrong carved his son’s first fiddle from a crate, and Kentucky old-time music/self-taught art siblings Noah and Charley Kinney recalled their father making a fiddle out of a cigar box. Instruments associated with spasm and jug bands such as the one-string washtub bass, washboard,

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3Gus Cannon, “Narration,” Walk Right In (Stax Records SCD-8603-2, 1999), 0:41-0:50.


jug, and suitcase were essentially cheap household items rethought and refugured for musical ends, and the fife and drum tradition of the Deep South more often than not featured a fife fashioned from river-bottom cane. Bluesmen often cite their first instrument as a homemade variant of the one-string or one-strand zither, commonly known these days as the diddley bow, which acted as a method of musical acculturation for children and was commonly made with a broom wire, bricks, nails, and a medicine bottle, sometimes using the house itself as a resonator. Those who played such self-constructed instruments before graduating to the guitar include numerous bluesmen of the Deep South from Booker Washington “Bukka” White to Clarksdale, Mississippi, musician James “Super Chikan” Johnson, who remembers fashioning diddley bows (his term) by the age of four or five.

We were just doing what we saw other kids do. Broom wire, baling wire. If we couldn’t find any wire, we’d burn an old tire to get the wire out of the inside of the tire and stretch it out there and string it up. Put Prince Albert can, snuff bottles or whatever we could find on it. We used to have a band out in the yard, man. Get large buckets for drums and molasses buckets. We’d take a molasses bucket and put just a little water in the corner of it, and I had a cousin that would beat the hambone on the molasses bucket, and he blew a turpentine bottle at the same time. Or he’d beat the ham bone on his hip and blow the bottle. Somebody else beating on a big large can, and we’d all be plucking our diddley bows. It’d be four or five diddley bows around plus a bass – we used to have a foot tub or a number three tub with a broom handle and a cord tied onto the broom handle. We could pull it tight and pluck that cord and the old tub would make a sound – dum-dum-de-dum-dum. You could tighten up – de-doo-doodle-doo; you could lay off – de-

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doo-doo-doo. . . . We was making all kinds of noises, just banging away. . . . You hear that all across the field, man.\(^7\)

The practice by bluesmen of making one’s own stringed instruments has continued to a degree in more recent times, with striking examples coming from Bo Diddley’s self-made square guitars and the functional works of art called “chicantars” by the aforementioned “Super Chikan,” who modifies gasoline cans into electric guitars that he decorates with acrylic-painted scenes of rural life – and that fetch good prices by celebrity collectors.

Davis appears to have taken similar delight making instruments as a precocious, musically curious child, one whose sensitivity to sound would have been heightened from his lack of sight. As he said to Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold in the early 1950s: “As I came about lucid, I would take a tin pan, take and drive a hole through it, and put me a neck in it, you understand, and take me a brace and bit, and bore me a hole and make me an instrument. My grandmother whipped me so much ’bout tearing up pie pans. She’d come in to cook and make pie and the pan would be done tore up. Till she see it wouldn’t do no good. So every time she go to the store, she’d buy me one when she’d buy her one, so she wouldn’t have me to whup ’bout it.”\(^8\)

That Davis made such instruments as a child also says a lot about the time when he came of age. During the last decade of the nineteenth century, the banjo was enjoying its final years as the king of popular music instruments. Of African origins and initially refitted for the New World by black Americans, the banjo had spent much of the

:\(^7\)James “Super Chikan” Johnson, Interview by author, 17 August 2007, Clarksdale, Mississippi, digital recording.

:\(^8\)Gary Davis, interview by Harold, reel 1, side 2, p. 1.
nineteenth century on the minstrel stage, where it made the leap from a folk instrument to a commercial one, and where in the hands of burnt-cork-faced white performers, it became the de rigueur instrument for the repertoire and stage antics of a genre informed by black music, all the while reducing its creators to racist caricature and demeaning stereotype. By Davis’s time, the banjo was so ubiquitous, it had spread into virtually every aspect of musical life for Americans including banjo clubs, orchestras, and the songs of the vaudeville stage. That he would be drawn to the banjo made perfect sense, given its musical role as link between minstrelsy and Davis’s preferred musical expression, ragtime. The syncopated rhythms and melodies of the banjo found their way into the “ragged” arrangements of popular “coon” songs from the 1880s and 1890s that sparked the ragtime craze prior to the piano taking over. Turn-of-the-century banjo recordings by Vess L. Ossman, Fred Van Eps, and others were arguably as crucial in popularizing ragtime as the more famous piano rags of composers such as Scott Joplin, whose mother played banjo and whose music, it has been argued, drew no small influence from the instrument.9 Two songs in Davis’s repertoire, “St. Louis Tickle” and Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag,” very likely would have been known to him through, among other versions, popular recordings by Ossman. Davis claimed he had learned both a variant of “Maple Leaf Rag” that he called “Make Believe Stunt” and another frequently played instrumental, “Cincinnati Flow Rag,” from onetime band mate Willie Walker when they played together in the early nineteen-teens.10 Yet this doesn’t diminish the

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probability that both guitarists would have known such tunes and tune types through the recorded banjo men of their day from Ossman to Dixieland jazz banjoist Johnny St. Cyr. There is enough structural and harmonic similarity, for example, between “Cincinnati Flow Rag” and such rags as George L. Lowery’s 1905 hit “Florida Rag” (which had one of its best-known recordings two years later by Ossman) to suggest that Davis and Walker were well familiar with such recordings.

In addition to contributing to ragtime’s development, the banjo also informed pre-WWII guitar blues. Although Gus Cannon was perhaps the most famous prewar blues era performer to retain the banjo as his instrument of choice alongside the jug he played, the banjo more often than not became an instrument of passage for many who went on to play folk blues guitar.\(^\text{11}\) This was the case most notably in the East Coast and especially Appalachia, where older string band traditions and a black tradition of banjo playing persisted well into the twentieth century, and where aspects of the banjo’s technical and repertory qualities were subsumed into country blues guitar by banjo players who eventually took up the six-string counterpart.\(^\text{12}\) Speculation has been offered, for example, that open tunings of the banjo impacted the open tunings used by blues

\(^{11}\)The rise of the guitar in the early twentieth century helped send the banjo to the sidelines of African American popular music, though it found sustained life in the 1920s in Dixieland jazz and in country music. By the 1940s, however, it became most associated with bluegrass, a relationship that persists to this day, with the banjo even acting as emblem (not to mention pop culture cliché thanks to the movie Deliverance) of perceived conservative, rural, white cultural values. Yet the banjo has re-entered African American musical life in recent years, and a number of current acts from Alvin Youngblood Hart, Corey Harris, and Otis Taylor to Guy Davis, Keb’ Mo’, the Ebony Hillbillies, and the Carolina Chocolate Drops have embraced and promoted the instrument for its African and African American heritage (even as it arguably appeals mainly to white audiences). Banjo star Béla Fleck has gotten in on the dialog as well with a documentary and companion recording of collaborations with African musicians, Throw Down Your Heart (dir. Sascha Paladino, Argot Pictures, 2008, 97 minutes) and Throw Down Your Heart: Tales from the Acoustic Planet, Vol. 3 – Africa Sessions (Rounder Records 610534, 2009).

that the banjo song of the mid-to late nineteenth century was perhaps a link between the a cappella work song in African American rural culture and the accompanied songs of the blues; and that enough compatibility existed between the contexts of string band music and the blues in the Piedmont – notably in rural house parties and other types of informal community gatherings which offered food, dance, drink, and general frolic – that it fostered a common repertoire and style, one which emphasized lighter sentiment and more danceable music compared to the emotional extremes of, say, Deep South blues. Like Davis, a number of Piedmont and East Coast blues guitarists either learned or were exposed to banjo as a child. Virginia guitarist John Jackson also played banjo and grew up in a musical household with parents roughly of the same generation as Davis – Jackson’s father played banjo and guitar in blues and pre-blues idioms and his mother played harmonica and accordion in addition to singing sacred songs. Fellow Virginian Archie Edwards had a father who played banjo and guitar, adapting the technique and repertoire of one to the other. Davis’s blues contemporary Willie Trice was guided musically by an uncle who played banjo, while Elizabeth Cotten started on banjo before switching to guitar, and both Etta Baker and her sister Cora Phillips played banjo in

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addition to slide guitar culled from the banjo technique of their father.\textsuperscript{18} Adjacent to Durham, Orange County in particular was a hotbed of bluesy musicians with string band/banjo roots, Chapel Hill-born Cotten included.\textsuperscript{19}

Only a few recordings of Davis’s banjo repertoire have been made commercially available, yet there are enough performances to draw some conclusions. For starters, Davis played both the five-string banjo and a hybrid variously called the banjitar, bantar, and banjo-guitar that consists of a banjo-type body set up with six strings and tuned like a guitar. As one might guess, the latter instrument sounds like a banjo but is played with guitar-like execution.\textsuperscript{20} Davis called it a “guitjo,”\textsuperscript{21} and owned one made by Gibson, which can be seen on the cover of his Prestige/Folklore album \textit{The Guitar & Banjo of Reverend Gary Davis} (the instrument now belongs to Roy Book Binder). In jazz, the best-known banjo-guitar practitioner was the aforementioned Johnny St. Cyr, who used the instrument on his Hot Five recordings with Louis Armstrong, while in blues Papa Charlie Jackson famously played one.\textsuperscript{22}

There are six commercially available performances by Davis on the banjo-guitar:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18}Ibid., 32.
\item \textsuperscript{19}For an excellent summary of string band/blues activity in Orange County, see Bastin, \textit{Red River Blues}, 272-76.
\item \textsuperscript{20}Old-time music authority Pat Conte prefers the label “banjo-guitar,” which, he says, was the de facto term for such an instrument in early Gibson catalogs. “A bantar is a thing I saw Roger McGuinn play in a little club in the village, an electric banjo that Rickenbacker made as a five-string,” he writes. “It may also be an instrument from Indonesia.” Pat Conte, correspondence with author, 19 January 2009.
\item \textsuperscript{21}Alex Shoumatoff, phone interview by author, 30 June 2008, digital recording.
\item \textsuperscript{22}Rex Ellis, \textit{With a Banjo on My Knee: A Musical Journey from Slavery to Freedom} (New York: Franklin Watts, 2001), 111.
\end{itemize}
1. “Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning” (1962, live)
2. Untitled (“She’s Funny That Way,” by Blind Boy Fuller) (1962/67, home)23
3. “West Coast Blues” (1962/70, home)
5. “Devil’s Dream” (1964, studio)
6. “She’s Funny That Way” (1968, live)24

We can add to that list a seventh banjo-guitar performance of “Cincinnati Flow Rag” made by Ernie Hawkins in a non-circulated private tape circa 1968/70.

As the above titles indicate, nearly all the music Davis played using the banjo-guitar existed in his guitar repertoire and was played with the same two-finger picking patterns in the right hand and same fretting/fingering patterns in the left hand that he used when performing this music on guitar. He apparently didn’t have any special repertory for the instrument – even a home recording of Blind Boy Fuller’s “She’s Funny That Way” is based, after all, on the guitar arrangement. As a result, these performances should be viewed more within the immediate context of his guitar repertoire and technique than that of the banjo, though Samuel Charters once made the interesting comparison between Mandingo right-hand kora technique of alternating thumb and first finger with Davis’s own two-finger approach, the link between such African stringed instruments and the guitar being the westernized banjo.25 With that in mind, one might

23This is a performance of Blind Boy Fuller’s number, “(I Got a Woman Crazy for Me) She’s Funny That Way,” a different tune than Davis’s own take on “She’s Funny That Way.”

24“Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning” can be found on At The Sign of the Sun 1962 (Heritage CD HT 03, 1990); “Please Baby” and “Devil’s Dream” are on The Guitar & Banjo of Reverend Gary Davis (Prestige/Folklore OBCCD-592-2, 2001); the work simply identified as “Untitled” is on At Home and Church (Stefan Grossman’s Guitar Workshop SGGW 130/1/2, 2010); “West Coast Blues” has circulated on Ragtime Guitar (Transatlantic TRA 244, 1971; Kicking Mule KM 106, 1974; Heritage HT 309, 1985) and Reverend Gary Davis (Heritage HT 308, 1985/Heritage HT CD 02, 1989); and “She’s Funny That Way” is on Lo’ I Be With You Always (Kicking Mule KM 1, 1973).

25See Samuel Charters, Sweet as Showers of Rain: The Bluesmen, Vol. II (New York: Oak Publications, 1977), 137. Charters is also quick to point out, however, that he doubts any real consciousness of an African tradition existed in the music of Davis and other Piedmont guitarists.
also view the hybrid banjo-guitar playing of Davis as a personalized manifestation at once of the stylistic sensibilities he first encountered on banjo and the technical advancements he subsequently made on guitar – an emblematic instrument that bridged his past with his musical maturation.

That past is preserved in nine known recordings by Davis on the five-string banjo. Here, the roots of Davis the young musician emerge, shining a light as well on turn-of-the-century songs and tastes that went by the wayside (commercially, at least) with the ascendancy of blues and jazz among African American musicians and music patrons. These songs are as follows:

1. “Kitty Went a-Courtin’” (1962, live)
2. “No More” (1962, live)
3. “Candyman” (1962/67, home)
4. “I Want To Be Saved” (1962/67, home)
5. “You’re Gonna Need King Jesus” (1962/67, home)
6. “Banjo Instrumental I” (1964, live)
7. “Banjo Instrumental II” (1964, live)
8. “I Know You’ll Miss Me” (1964, live)

Briefly, of the above known tunes he performed on banjo, five are sacred or sacred-leaning (2, 4, 5, 8, 9) and four are secular, with examples of minstrel-era stylings (6, 7), carnival music (3), and the kind of rural folk/dance music that was “common

26“Kitty Went a-Courtin’” is on At The Sign of the Sun 1962 (Heritage CD HT 03, 1990) and is identified by a different title, “Chickens Crowing,” on Lou Curtiss’s Facebook page (http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=1632259515&r=832864508.387976219.1/#!/profile.php?v=wall&ref=search&ref=sid=832864508.387976219.1!); “No More” can be found at Curtiss’s website http://www.folkartsrarerecords.com/library; “Candyman,” “I Want To Be Saved,” and “You’re Gonna Need King Jesus” are on At Home and Church (Stefan Grossman’s Guitar Workshop SGGW 130/1/2, 2010); “Banjo Instrumental I,” “Banjo Instrumental II,” and “I Know You’ll Miss Me” are all on Blind Gary Davis at Allegheny College, Meadville, Pa., 1964: Afternoon Workshop (Document DLP 527, 1988); and “Out on the Ocean Sailing” is on O, Glory: The Apostolic Studio Sessions (GENES GCD 9908, 1995). Davis apparently also performed “Cripple Creek” on banjo; see Stefan Grossman, liner notes to Bring Your Money, Honey! (Fontana SFJL 914, 1968) and Grossman, Rev. Gary Davis/Blues Guitar, 47.
stock” between white and black players in the early twentieth century (1). Three are bipartite in form with either an A + B melodic structure, i.e., the high and low parts of fiddle tunes in string band music (1) or a verse-refrain organization (2, 8). Four of the tunes, mostly gospel, are strophic in form – AAAB (3, 6) and AABA (4, 5), while two are single-theme forms built on either a harmonic ground (6) or a riff (7). Seven have vocals, and of these, five operate in large part as instrumentals with a core lyrical riff, i.e., a short vocal phrase that Davis repeated against musical statements by the banjo: in the play-party-esque “Kitty Went a-Courtin’,” Davis (who says something closer to “Kitty wants corn and kitty can’t get it”) sings only the title line four times, as a kind of vocal variation on the A melody, while the open-ended B section presents newly generated harmonic and rhythmic material with each return. In “No More,” thirteen of the performance’s seventeen statements are of the “no more” refrain, with nine sung back to back in a mantra-like intensity. Even in his well-known “Candy Man,” the banjo version contains only vocal iterations of the title phrase, as if he had mentally found himself back playing for dances and country frolics, where groove, momentum, and continual instrumental variation were most prized.

In looking at the dates and contexts of this music, Davis appears to have taken up the banjo again only in the early 1960s, at least publicly. While he was known to talk about this particular skill, one that he cultivated as a child pre-guitar, it was only in 1962 that we first hear Davis on the banjo, nearly sixty years after he recalled learning it. This could have been for a number of reasons, among them that banjos can be heavier than guitars, making them less practical for a street musician. More significantly, interest in

the banjo had expanded to mainstream audiences via Earl Scruggs, whose playing chimed across television screens weekly in the theme to *The Beverly Hillbillies*, which debuted in late September 1962, and via the revivalist folk music scene (of which Davis became a part) thanks to the banjo’s prominent role in the music of Pete Seeger, the Kingston Trio, and others. For example, when Davis made his debut at the Philadelphia Folk Festival in September 1962, the buzz was not only about the Reverend, who had played the Saturday evening concert and jammed earlier with Brownie McGhee, but about future Blue Grass Boy Bill Keith, who had wowed attendees with his five-string banjo take on the fiddle standard “Devil’s Dream.”28 In such an environment, being around others who played banjo appears to have sparked Davis’s own memories of the five-string instrument and his desire to play it again. His first known recordings on banjo date from June 1962 when he debuted at San Diego’s Sign of the Sun, a bookstore with a folk music concert series. There, Davis stayed at the venue’s boarding house and played with many locals and fellow performers, including two that frailed the banjo (cf. p. 454), Jerry Houck and Curt Bouterse. “And he [Davis] said, ‘I used to pick. I used to play that kind of banjo when I was a boy,’” recalls longtime San Diego Folk Festival organizer Lou Curtiss. “And he took the banjo and started playing on it. So we asked him if he’d play a banjo tune or so

28See Gene Shay, liner notes, *Philadelphia Folk Festival, Vol. 2* (Prestige/International 13072, 1063). It’s worth noting here that the version of “Devil’s Dream” which Davis recorded numerous times, including one on banjo-guitar in 1964, has no relationship to the Keith number, which was the more familiar tune shared among string band musicians. Instead, Davis’s same-named tune appears to have been a rag-like instrumental of his own creation. The title “Devil’s Dream” also shows up in the African American Deep South as a type of chase tune (and has little if any musical similarity to the above-mentioned fiddle tune) – see, for example, the two quills-and-drums performances made for Alan Lomax by Sid Hemphill in 1942, found on *Deep River of Song: Black Appalachia – String Bands, Songsters and Hoedowns* (Rounder 11661-1823-2, 1999) and in 1959, found on *Southern Journey, Vol. 3: 61 Highway Mississippi – Delta Country Blues, Spirituals, Work Songs & Dance Music* (Rounder CD 1703, 1997). Versions have also been collected played on harmonica and dulcimer; see Library of Congress Music Division, Check-List of Recorded Songs in the English Language in the Library of Congress Archive of American Folk Song to July, 1940 (Washington, D. C.: Library of Congress, 1942; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1971), 76.
when he did his concert.” Regardless of the motivation, Davis clearly enjoyed playing the instrument – a viable connection to his youth – and he took the opportunity to share that part of himself with folk audiences who had grown increasingly receptive to its sounds. Five of his six known recordings on banjo are in live settings, after all.

Davis’s banjo abilities not only offered revivalist crowds a chance to hear repertoire that extended back to the early decades of the century, but a chance to hear the instrument – by now considered the domain of white players – performed by a black artist. This was indeed unique for many at the time. Revivalist blues and folk player Guy Davis (no relation to Gary Davis) recalled that there was little room in the socially progressive agenda of the Civil Rights era for African American musicians who wished to play the banjo (which carried the lingering stigma of minstrelsy): “My father [noted actor Ossie Davis] first bought me a banjo in 1960, and that was precisely the time when a black man in America did not need to be playing on a banjo.” That’s not to suggest Gary Davis brandished the banjo for socio-political reasons or even operated purely from the legacy of black rural traditions (itself a rich amalgamation of sources).

As in his guitar playing, Davis the banjoist pulled from numerous folk and popular sources including, it would seem, the music of famed banjo entertainer Uncle Dave Macon, for which he seemed to have an affinity. In a way, Grand Ole Opry star Macon (1870-1952) was something of the country music equivalent to Davis, a musician whose professional career didn’t begin till he was in his 50s, and whose repertoire

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29 Lou Curtiss, phone interview by author, 3 August 2009, San Diego, digital recording.
31 I am indebted to Pat Conte, Mike Seeger, and my father, banjo player Tony Ellis, for offering invaluable insights about Davis’s banjo repertoire and technique.
bridged two centuries, in his case, combining minstrelsy and vaudeville with an emerging country music industry. The Grand Ole Opry star’s first hit, the 1924 Vocalion side “Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy,” was itself part of a bi-racial family of tunes that includes African American numbers such as “Bootlegger’s Blues” by the Mississippi Sheiks and “Shanty Blues” by Henry Thomas. “Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy” also mirrors the melodic contour in at least two of Davis’s banjo performances, the A sections of “No More” and “I Know You’ll Miss Me,” which despite having similar enough qualities are different tunes, or at the very least, different interpretations of the same musical elements (qualities that can also be heard in such performances as “Georgia Buck” as played by black North Carolina musicians Joe Thompson and his cousin Odell Thompson). Both Davis performances, for example, employ a passing minor inflection – the sixth scale degree – on the fourth beat of the A part (verse), akin to “Down the Road” and related titles such as Macon’s 1928 number “Over the Road I’m Bound to Go.” That said, “I Know You’ll Miss Me” likely is a variant of the tune best known as “Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone?” by the Carter Family. The refrain of “No More” shows strong musical affinity with the refrain to the 1927 version of “Old Aunt Betsy” by Frank Blevins and His Tar Heel Rattlers, down to the same emphatic IV chord and melodic idea. There is also lyrical parallel in the refrains of the two songs: “When I die, when I die, I’m going to see Aunt Betsy when I die” versus “No more, no more, I never will come back no more.”


34“Georgia Buck” can be found on Black Banjo Songsters of North Carolina and Virginia (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings SF CD 40079, 1998).
It stands to reason that Davis would have known such tunes when he was entertaining people on the streets of North and South Carolina in the early decades of the twentieth century and might have even played banjo in some of these situations. The only early reference to Davis playing a banjo comes from a 1935 welfare file written by someone who likely didn’t know the difference. In it, he notes that Davis earned change playing the “banjo,” which is most likely a reference to the guitar (the banjo having been the stereotypical stringed instrument of blacks in white eyes). We see this misidentification in guitarist Robert Johnson’s death certificate, for example, where it mentions that weeks before he died, he had come to a plantation to play “banjo” for a party.\(^35\) Yet it is also possible that Davis would have had a banjo among his possessions the day he was visited by his caseworker. The gap in time between his childhood experiences playing banjo and his revival of this instrument when he was 66 would seem too great to think he simply gave it up for decades, especially given the proficiency he displayed on it later in life. (Then again, that’s exactly what happened to Piedmont peer Elizabeth Cotten, who put aside the banjo and guitar for some fifty years before resuming both.\(^36\))

Davis used at least two banjo tunings: common, or regular, G (gDGBD) and common, or regular, C (gCGBD). These can be further grouped in the tuning families of H1 (for standard G, where the third string is tuned a fourth above the fourth, or “high,” bass string) and L1 (for regular C, where the third string is tuned a fifth above the fourth,

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or “low,” bass string). The G tuning is the typical string relationship encountered among rural Southern banjo players, as is the regular C tuning, one of three frequently used tunings in that key along with double C (gCGCD) and full C (gCGCE). Davis’s two tunings appear to be essentially split in his known repertoire, with “Kitty Went a-Courti n,” “Banjo Instrumental I,” “Banjo Instrumental II,” “Candyman,” and “I Want to Be Saved” falling into the C tuning, and “No More,” “I Know You’ll Miss Me,” “You’re Gonna Need King Jesus,” and “Out on the Ocean Sailing” belonging to the G tuning.

“Banjo Instrumental I” consists of a series of arpeggiated I-IV-V chords similar in spirit to finger-picked numbers such as the jig Gus Cannon played on his Stax album and, especially, a Dock Boggs “Banjo Clog,” (also in gCGBD) which he knew from no fewer than three players locally in Virginia, including two African American banjoists. On “Banjo Instrumental II,” however, Davis inverts the expectations of the regular C tuning, which is almost exclusively employed for banjo songs with a strong C major tonality, by playing the song in C minor. He achieves this by fretting the high open-D string at the first instead of second fret to play an E-flat note instead of the expected E-natural.

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37See Peter R. Hoover’s chart of nearly thirty banjo tunings, Conway, African Banjo Echoes, 225.

38Mike Seeger, liner notes to Dock Boggs, His Folkways Years 1963-1968 (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings SF 40108, 1998), 29. Gus Cannon’s jig can be found at 1:23-1:36 of “Narration,” from Walk Right In (Stax Records SCD-8603-2, 1999).
Example 7.1. Reverend Gary Davis, “Banjo Instrumental II.” Track time 0:07-0:15. Taken from Blind Gary Davis At Allegheny College, Meadville, Pa., 1964: Afternoon Workshop (Document DLP 527, 1988). Banjo is in regular C tuning (g-C-G-C-D).

The result is a very unusual approach to the banjo and to that tuning in particular. The song itself operates as an extended single-strain riff with subtle variations but lacking the bipartite form typical of much banjo and fiddle dance music. In that regard, it is perhaps the most pleasantly perplexing banjo song by Davis, one that harkens back at once to black rural roots and the minstrel stage.

Of Davis’s nine banjo songs, only the studio performance approaches standard pitch. The live tunes from 1962 are low by approximately a whole step, the home recordings ca. 1962/67 are low closer to a half step, and those from 1964 are sharp by nearly a half step. Tuning low was not unheard of among black banjo players, who possibly slackened the strings for aesthetic reasons in that it approximated the sound of older gut-stringed banjos (a more complex timbral quality being an African and, by extension, African American musical trait to begin with). Conversely, tuning high would have given the banjo a more brilliant timbre and sense of aural excitement.

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39 Mike Seeger, correspondence with author, 29 January 2009.
40 Tony Ellis, conversation with author, 28 June 2009.
As with his right-hand approach on the guitar, Davis only used his thumb and first finger to pluck the banjo; unlike his work on the guitar (and banjo-guitar), however, he did not use thumb or finger picks since one’s fingernails are essential to playing old-time banjo. Like John Snipes and other African American banjoists, Davis switched between frailing (especially clawhammer, or drop-thumb, which utilizes the thumb on strings other than the high G) and two-finger, or double-thumb, style. The difference between the two is mostly a matter of strumming versus picking: in frailing, the index fingernail brushes through the strings, complemented by downstrokes from the thumb; in two-finger playing, the strings are plucked guitar-like with upstrokes by the index finger and downstrokes by the thumb.\footnote{\label{fpick}For a good discussion of banjo right hand techniques, see C. P. Heaton, “The Five-String Banjo in North Carolina,” \textit{Southern Folklore Quarterly} 35 (1971): 62-82.} When Davis frailed, he recalled other black Piedmont players such as John Jackson, whose versions of “Cindy” and “Going Up North” on a five-string banjo in regular G tuning are of a stylistic piece with Davis.\footnote{\label{fjackson}See \textit{John Jackson, Country Blues & Ditties}, Arhoolie CD 471, 1999.} Davis the frailer also resembled in tone and attack the playing of North Carolina black banjoist John Snipes, who farmed in the northwest part of the state as a young man and spent time in Chatham County absorbing songs from traveling musicians such as Durham medicine show performer Duke Mason.\footnote{\label{fconway}Cece Conway and Scott Odell, liner notes, \textit{Black Banjo Songsters of North Carolina and Virginia} (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings SF CD 40079, 1998), 4.} Songs by Snipes such as the fox chase number “Old Rattler,” “Ain’t Gonna Rain No More,” “Going Where I’ve Never Been Before,” and “You Don’t Know My Darling” (all found on the collection \textit{Black Banjo Songsters of North Carolina and Virginia}) share the same riff-driven, improvisational qualities, tight

\footnote{\label{fwill}See David Evans, liner notes, \textit{Will Slayden, African American Banjo Songs from West Tennessee} (Tennessee Folklore Society TFS 123, 2001).}

\footnote{\label{fwill}See Will Slayden, \textit{African American Banjo Songs from West Tennessee} (Tennessee Folklore Society TFS 123, 2001).}
melodic restraint, and what CeCe Conway calls “emotional core lines”\textsuperscript{45} in the lyrics with Davis’s banjo material, though Snipes used more variety in his tunings. Nonetheless, a similar sense of style, attack, and musical ideas exists between the two, as on Snipes’s interpretation of the minstrel number, “Long Tail Blue,” which could be a companion piece to Davis’s “Kitty Went a-Courtin’,” or the song Snipes learned from Mason, “Cooking in the Kitchen,” which shares melodic and lyric elements with Davis’s guitar number, “Little Boy, Little Boy, Who Made Your Britches?,” leaving little doubt as to the impact regional traditional music, banjo included, had on Davis.

Five songs are played predominantly in a frailed, or clawhammer, style—“Kitty Went a-Courtin,” “No More,” “Banjo Instrumental I,” “Banjo Instrumental II,” “I Want to Be Saved”—while four—“I Know You’ll Miss Me,” “Candyman,” “You’re Gonna Need King Jesus,” and “Out on the Ocean Sailing”—are in a picked two-finger style reminiscent of Virginia penal farm inmate Jimmie Strothers, who was recorded in 1936 by John Lomax and Harold Spivacke for the Library of Congress.\textsuperscript{46} In a trait found among black banjo players of the East Coast, Davis also could alternate between styles within the same song, as he does for one phrase toward the end of “Kitty Went A-Courtin’.”\textsuperscript{47}

\footnote{Conway and Odell, \textit{Black Banjo Songsters}, 19.}

\footnote{For recordings of Jimmie Strothers, see \textit{Deep River of Song: Virginia and the Piedmont—Minstrelsy, Work Songs, and Blues} (Rounder Records 11661-1827-2, 2000). Growing up in western North Carolina, banjo player Tony Ellis recalled hearing a number of mountain/bluegrass banjoists, notably George Pegram, who used primarily thumb and first finger in a “double-thumb” manner; Tony Ellis, conversation with author 28 June 2009. Others included Bascom Lunsford and Wade Mainer.}

\footnote{Conway and Odell, liner notes, \textit{Black Banjo Songsters}, 7. Davis changes up his right-hand style on “Kitty went a-Courting” at 1:48-1:55 into the song; see track 12 on \textit{At The Sign of the Sun 1962} (Heritage CD HT 03, 1990). Though he fumbles through the transition, it is nonetheless a deliberate switch of right hand mechanics.}
Davis’s guitar technique has been hailed as the virtuosic fruition of a ragtime guitar style, and he frequently made comparisons between his fretboard acumen and playing ragtime’s primary instrument, the piano. But given the impact syncopated banjo tunes had on ragtime, one should not discount the banjo’s role informing the guitar technique of Davis, especially when he used a similar right hand trick for both – the aforementioned “drop thumb” in banjo lingo. This technique involves lowering, or “dropping,” the thumb to strike the inner or top strings, thereby engaging the thumb in melodic activity with the index finger. This too is a frequent practice by banjo players, black and white, to the extent that Earl Scruggs once advised Blue Grass Boy Tony Ellis to use the thumb as much as possible when playing banjo melodies since it added clarity and power, which in turn resulted in stronger and clearer melodies.\(^{48}\)

Davis used this technique, especially when he would strike a IV chord, as in “No More,” where he drops his thumb down from the G drone string to help arpeggiate the C chord as in m. 2 below.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example7.2.png}
\caption{Example 7.2. Reverend Gary Davis, “No More.” Track time 0:07-0:11. Taken from Lou Curtiss’s website at http://www.folkartsrecords.com/library (last accessed 20 September 2009). The banjo is in standard G (gDGBD) but tuned a step low, e.g., the above example’s actual pitch would be closer to F than G. P = thumb, i = index finger.}
\end{figure}

\(^{48}\) Tony Ellis, conversation with author, 30 June 2009.
This type of thumb movement was something he used tirelessly on the guitar, to the point that it became a stylistic trait (see Chapter Three). In each case, setting up the thumb to grab melody notes provided built-in syncopation and asymmetrical rhythmic patterns essential to both black banjo music and ragtime as it was translated to the guitar.

Davis’s most notable banjo number – certainly his most realized on that instrument – was “Out on the Ocean Sailing,” the only five-string performance ever captured in a studio and one of the finer examples of his spiritual repertoire.49 Played in a picking manner (as opposed to frailing), Davis here makes extensive use of his right hand thumb, comparable with how it dominated his guitar work. This provided on banjo an imitative heterophony, with the vocal melody plus a prominent rhythmic drive heard in the series of sixteenth-note micro-riffs that function as a sort of a call-and-response pattern with the voice. Davis also milks the pentatonic song for vocal and banjo expressivity through manipulation of the third scale degree and its so-called “blue” note ambiguity, especially when he plays a fretted B-flat against an open-string B-natural, as in measures two and three, and reinforces the note by doubling it between the voice and accented bends from the banjo, as in m. 5.

49 John Townley, the album’s producer, remembered that Davis played the banjo unsolicited, possibly because, according to Townley, he knew this would be a final album (his next to last studio record, it turned out) and he wanted to capture/preserve aspects of his musicality that had heretofore not been recorded; interview by author, 8 February 2009, digital recording.

The song itself appears to belong to a body of hymnody common in the nineteenth century in white and black religious expression, where sea and storm imagery became a potent metaphor for spiritual journeys, and where musical ideas and tunes for African

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50Evangelical movements have commonly tied their concerns to technological innovations including the body of “gospel” train songs that arose in the nineteenth century – into the twentieth century, travel by car and plane were also incorporated into the populist symbolism of such religious song.
American banjo developed in part through the interactions slaves had with German and Irish immigrants in the water industries of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{51} It bears reminding that such imagery held even more resonance for those whose ancestors came to America via the Middle Passage, and whose worldly concern for freedom found coded power in the pregnant imagery of the spirituals.\textsuperscript{52} Interestingly, the other pre-World War II recording of this familiar religious number was by Kinston, North Carolina, gospel quartet Mitchell’s Christian Singers, who were also brought to New York to record, like Davis and Fuller, by talent scout J. B. Long. Davis sang different verses than the quartet, but the melody was close enough to suggest they each knew the same regional variant of the song – Henry Morrison and the St. Simon’s Island Singers in Georgia recorded a variant, “I’m Gonna Sail Like a Ship on the Ocean,” that shared general melodic and lyric characteristics as well.\textsuperscript{53}

All of the above indicates Davis had a rather conservative approach to banjo playing, the reflection of an inherently older style that was in transition by the time he came of musical age. His banjo work displayed features shared by many Southern players, especially, as one might suspect, the riff-generating frailing and picking of black banjoists from the Piedmont. Yet Davis was not above a few tonal twists and finger-picking surprises, the latter likely impacting how he developed his right hand approach.

\textsuperscript{51}Conway and Odell, liner notes, \textit{Black Banjo Songsters}, 2.

\textsuperscript{52}Lawrence Levine has offered the most persuasive argument for coded language in the spirituals; see especially Lawrence W. Levine, \textit{Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), and Lawrence W. Levine, “Slave Songs and Slave Consciousness: An Exploration in Neglected Sources,” in \textit{African American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture}, ed. Timothy E. Fulop and Albert J. Raboteau (New York: Routledge, 1997), 57-88.

\textsuperscript{53}Henry Morrison and the St. Simon’s Island Singers, “I’m Gonna Sail Like a Ship on the Ocean,” on \textit{Sounds of the South} (Atlantic 7 82496-2, 1993; original recording 1959 by Alan Lomax).
on the guitar. Finally, like his guitar playing, Davis’s banjo material merged historical precedent and individual expressivity into a musical whole that was his alone.

**HARMONICA**

The harmonica (or “harp”) was the first instrument Davis learned as a child and one that remained a constant companion throughout his career. Those who knew him noted that he always kept one on his person, and he typically would include one or two harp numbers in concert. As he noted in interviews, his first exposure to the instrument came at age five from an “Uncle William” on his mother’s side who, whenever he bought a harmonica, got a second one for Davis.  

Invented in the 1820s, the harmonica was once the most widely played instrument in the U.S., and, according to Harold Courlander, the most ubiquitous instrument as well among African Americans. Its appeal, especially within the rural South, was obvious: it was portable, loud, easy to play, hard to break, and cheap (being but a nickel in the early 1900s). As B. B. King told folklorist William Ferris about growing up in Mississippi, “If you were living like I did, a harmonica was about all you could afford.”

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54 Gary Davis, interview by Harold, reel 1, side 2, p. 1. Davis told Harold that “he was very devoted to me. From my childhood on up I never knewed him to hit me but twice in his life.” Davis referred to this relative as an “uncle-in-law” in one interview; see Richard A. Noblett, Stephen T. Rye, and John Offord, “The Reverend Gary Davis,” *Blues Unlimited* 25 (September 1965): 10. Davis also mentioned a grandfather whom he never knew on his mother’s side that played harmonica; see Grossman, *Rev. Gary Davis/Blues Guitar*, 8.


Yet the harmonica was also capable of highly programmatic and ingenious expression – with a little skill, one could learn to imitate the sounds of nature (hounds, chickens), machines (trains), and man (the human voice, especially a crying baby). As a “toy,” the harmonica also fascinated children, and a number of blues harpists from Little Walter to Jimmy Reed started out playing as kids.

For the bluesman, both virtuosic and psychological elements added to the harp’s appeal. Through its ability to mimic sounds, the harmonica reinforced one of the more admired aesthetics in southern black folk tradition (itself carried over from African traditions), namely to make one’s instrument “speak.” The harp was also uniquely suited to the intimacy of blues – even when compared to the genre’s other solo instruments, the piano and the guitar – and was ready at a moment’s notice, in the words of John W. Work, to offer spontaneous feeling and execution. Wrote the musicologist from observations based on his own fieldwork, “The harmonica probably belongs more completely to the instant mood of the lonesome traveler than other instruments.”

Davis’s harmonica playing, which first shows up in his recorded repertoire in 1961, is perhaps the least understood of his multi-instrumental abilities (and a more rigorous study is needed beyond what the scope of this paper can offer). For starters, there are relatively few harp recordings by Davis, and those that exist bear an initial sameness that only repeated listens can undo. More to the point, people attracted to Davis’s music tend to be guitarists, and it takes a harp player to appreciate what he could

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do on that instrument. Technical considerations aside, his approach to harmonica was distinctively of a time and place. As such, it is – alongside his banjo playing – among the richest connections we have to Davis the traditional performer, not to mention an important example of pre-blues Piedmont traditions in general.

Some initial observations: Davis’s harp repertoire, like that on the banjo and piano, is limited. In line with many blues harpists, he preferred a Hohner Marine Band model, arguably the best-crafted harmonica for the price at one time. He used almost exclusively diatonic harps and preferred a C harp for his religious songs (which, when played in his usual “choked” or cross-harp style, put the actual performances in the key of G, his preferred key on guitar as well). In contrast, a G harp (which, when “choked,” translated to the key of D) was more common for his secular songs on the instrument. More specifically, the majority of religious harmonica performances – five of eight – use a C harp (i.e., key of G), while the majority of secular performances (six of twelve) employ a G harp (five played in the key of D and one played in straight G). Yet Davis also performed in a number of other harp keys, including E, F, D, and A, and appears to have used at times whatever harmonica was available – a scenario familiar enough to blues harpists who learned to express themselves with whatever they had.60

The sacred/secular breakdown of Davis’s commercially released harmonica performances (not tunes or tune types) is as follows:

**Sacred:**
1. “Hold to God’s Unchanging Hand” (1961, studio)
2. “No One Can Do Me like Jesus” (1961, studio)

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60Billy Gibson, interview by author, 4 March 2009, Memphis, Tennessee, digital recording. Gibson recalls a Norwegian seminar attended by blues harp giant James Cotton, who was asked to perform. “He said, ‘Just hand me a harp.’ And that was it. Then he goes, ‘Man, this is a terrible harp!’ But he played anyway. It didn’t matter.”
3. “Right or Wrong” (8:51) (1962, live)
4. “God Don’t Work Like a Natural Man” (1962, live)
5. “I’m Gonna Wait until He Comes” (1964, live)
6. “I’ve Done All My Singing for My Lord” (1965, live)
7. “God’s Unchanging Hand” (1966, studio)

Secular:
1. “Fox Chase” (1962, live)
2. “Fox Chase” (a.k.a., “Oh Lord,” 1962 live)
3. “Fox Chase” (1962/67, home)
5. “Coon Hunt” (1964, live)
6. “Harmonica Solo” (1964, live)
8. “Birdshead Special” (a.k.a., “Birmingham Special,” 1966, studio)
9. “Coon Chase” (1967, live)
10. “Lost John” (1968, live)
11. “Birmingham Special” (1968, live)
12. “Lost John” (1971, studio)

That Davis knew religious music on harmonica should not be surprising. Though
his denomination was Baptist, his musical expression drew as well from the Sanctified

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61 “Hold to God’s Unchanging Hand” and “No One Can Do Me like Jesus” can be found on Say No to the Devil (Prestige/Bluesville OBCCD-519-2, 1990); “Right or Wrong” is on Live at Gerde’s Folk City – February, 1962 (Stefan Grossman’s Guitar Workshop SGGW114/5/6, 2009); “God Don’t Work like a Natural Man” is on At the Sign of the Sun 1962 (Heritage HT CD 03, 1990); “I’m Gonna Wait until He Comes” (identified as “God’s Unchanging Hand”) is on Live 1962-1964 (Wolf Records RO 120.915, 1988); “I’ve Done All My Singing for My Lord” appears on Live at Newport (Vanguard 79588-2, 2001); “God’s Unchanging Hand” is on Sun Is Going Down (Folkways, FS 3542, 1976); and “Time Ain’t So Long” is on Bring Your Money, Honey! (Fontana SFJL 914, 1968).

62 “Fox Chase” (#1) is on Live at Gerde’s Folk City – February, 1962 (Stefan Grossman’s Guitar Workshop SGGW 114/5/6, 2009); #2 is listed as “Fox Chase” on Let Us Get Together (Sonet/Kicking Mule LP SNKF 103, 1974) and as “Oh Lord” in a longer version on Live at Gerde’s Folk City; a third, home-taped version of “Fox Chase” is on At Home and Church (Stefan Grossman’s Guitar Workshop SGGW 130/1/2, 2010); “The Coon Hunt” (#4) can be found on The Guitar & Banjo of Reverend Gary Davis (Prestige/Folklore OBCCD-592-2, 2001); “Coon Hunt” (#5) is on Manchester Free Trade Hall 1964 (Document DOCD-32-20-14, 2007); a song listed simply as “Harmonica Solo” (#6) appears on Blind Gary Davis at Allegheny College, Meadville, Pa., 1964: Afternoon Workshop (Document DLP 527, 1988); “Coon Chase” (#7) is on Live & Kickin’ (Just a Memory JAM 9133-2, 1997); “Long John” (#8) and “Birdshead Special” (#9) appear on Sun Is Going Down (Folkways, FS 3542, 1976) – the same performance of “Birdshead Special” appears in abridged form as “Birmingham Special” on O, Glory: The Apostolic Studio Sessions (GENES GCD 9908, 1995); “Lost John” (#10) and “Birmingham Special” (#11) are on Bring Your Money, Honey! (Fontana SFJL 914, 1968); and “Lost John” (#12) shows up on From Blues to Gospel (Biograph/Shout Factory! DK 34007, 2004).
faiths, where an instrument such as harmonica was not only welcome in worship alongside guitars, drums, tambourines, etc., but was equated by some with the Old Testament harp of David. A number of prewar artists, blues and gospel figures alike, recorded religious material with the harmonica, from Jaybird Coleman and Blind Roger Hays to Elder Richard Bryant’s Church-of-God-in-Christ troupe and the jug-band jubilance of the Holy Ghost Sanctified Singers. Among Davis’s eight religious performances, there are only three songs or song types. “No One Can Do Me like Jesus,” “Right or Wrong,” and the rest, which we might group under the melody type that belongs to “Hold to God’s Unchanging Hand.” Davis was recorded performing that particular hymn twice on harp, but an additional four songs adhere to the same melody, albeit with different words in each case: “God Don’t Work like a Natural Man,” “I’ve Done All My Singing for My Lord,” “Time Ain’t So Long,” and “I’m Gonna Wait until He Comes” (which the Wolf label, perhaps sensing a similarity, labeled as “God’s Unchanging Hand” on the LP). This changing out of words, hardly unique to Davis, was a frequent folk process that extends, in American religious life at least, back to the pieced-together centonization of shape-note hymns. For Davis, the use of a familiar melody served several purposes at once: it connected immediately with an audience, and it provided instant structure for the spontaneous application of musical and (mostly) lyrical ideas not unlike how a twelve-bar blues encouraged improvisation in his secular repertoire. The harp here clearly serves the words and as a result is less flashy than in the secular material. There is the occasional vocal “whoop” or double-timed rhythm, but

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mainly the harp functions as a compliment to the voice in call-and-answer riffing and as a vehicle for rhythmic and implied harmonic support.64

His secular harp repertory was just as limited, and existed essentially within two types: the chase and the train song. Both types were standard fare for harpists, with Fox Chases having presumably circulated in the Deep South by the 1870s.65 Both were also mandatory for any self-respecting harmonica player, black or white, especially the train song.66 As Harold Courlander described in his landmark work on black traditional song, _Negro Folk Music, U.S.A._:

Harmonica virtuosos are able to play the sounds of animals – goats, sheep, cows, dogs, cats, chickens, and birds – and of crying babies, electric pumps and railroads. There are few experienced country Negro harmonica players who do not take pride in their railroad tunes, which reproduce the puff and surge of engines, the clacking of wheels over the track joints, and the locomotive’s whistle. Each player gives the name of some railroad line or famous express train to his individual composition – Cannon Ball, Old Ninety-Nine, Yellow Dog, Southern Pacific, and so on. One popular exercise is the fox chase, in which the harmonica is called upon to imitate the panting and baying of the hounds, their yelps as they approach their quarry, and the fading sounds as the pack disappears in the distance.67

Yet the choice of these song types implied more than the harp’s ability to parody the sounds of both. They also suggested two sides of the black experience in the racist

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64I am grateful to blues harmonica virtuosos Billy Gibson and Steven Tracy (also a respected scholar in African American studies) for their thoughts on Davis’s harp playing.

65Don Kent, liner notes to _Harmonica Masters: Classic Recordings from the 1920’s and 30’s_ (Yazoo 2019, 1996).

66Ibid. African American traditional musician DeFord Bailey, for example, had a mastery of both, including versions of the Fox Chase and the tune that sealed his reputation as an early star of the Grand Ole Opry, his train number “Pan-American Blues” (Brunswick, 146, 1927). Of course, other instruments from the fiddle and banjo to guitar and piano can imitate non-musical sounds, though the harmonica is arguably the only instrument to develop core repertoire from imitation.

South: persecution and escape, where chase tunes were associative of the pursuit and lynching of black men – see especially “The Escaped Convict” by George “Bullet” Williams (Paramount 12651, 1928) – while trains, as vibrant a motion emblem as there ever was within black folklore, held promise in the ability to leave such a situation.68

Davis’s renditions of various chases and train sounds belong to a Piedmont tradition shared, most obviously, with his immediate contemporary, Sonny Terry, who was also blind, of a similar regional and generational background, and whose repertoire overlapped to an extent with that of Davis (notably “Twelve Gates to the City,” which Terry first recorded with Blind Boy Fuller). Davis and Terry performed together numerous times throughout their careers, including a 1954 album for Stinson and, in later years, concert duets on such favorites as “Sun Is Going Down.” And while Davis’s harp playing doesn’t match the dazzling virtuosity of Terry’s (who was arguably the pinnacle of the Piedmont harmonica tradition), both players enjoyed a similar complexity of tone, texture, and, especially, rhythmic excitement. Davis’s playing, built on strong, pulsing rhythms with snippets of riff-assembled melody buried in the harmonic texture, also suggests players like one-man-band Dr. Ross and prewar Alabama harpist Palmer McAbee, whose “Lost Boy Blues” (Victor 21352, 1928), has an almost East Coast feel with the kind of heavy riffing and thick textures that Davis favored (oddly, the central riff in McAbee’s harp song seems to have been a direct inspiration on Davis’s instrumental guitar number, “Lost Boy in the Wilderness”).

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Davis was recorded playing nine chase-type tunes labeled variously “Fox Chase,” “Coon Hunt,” “Coon Chase,” “Long John,” and “Lost John,” the latter two being variations on the animal chase and not the more well-known folk/prison song concerning a slave or convict on the run (a.k.a., “Long Gone Lost John” or “Lonesome John”). In fact, as a group, Davis’s performances might better be called “Coon Chase” or “Coon Hunt” (which a few are), since his spoken asides invariably mentioned dogs on a hunt, as in a “Coon Chase” from 1967 that Davis introduced in concert by stating: “Man went to huntin’ one night, you know. Dog got out a coon down there, you know. Little dog is called Lost John and every time he tree, you can hear him cry.” Still, the central image of black folk hero Long John in flight linked the image of the pursued black man metaphorically to the animal chase in African American vernacular music; instead of a raccoon or fox being treed, it was the black male “coon” of the racist South that was the target. Such tunes could then act subtly but effectively as a kind of code-switching commentary depending on who was in earshot of the musical “hunt.” Davis certainly intended as much in at least one performance, where he distinctly uttered in the middle of the song, “Get him, Bo. Tree a nigger,” and in doing so, he made the most explicit link since “Bullet” Williams between the body of chase songs in African American music and white-on-black violence.

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69:024-0:36 into “Coon Chase,” track 3 on Reverend Gary Davis, Live & Kickin’ (Justin Time Records/Just a Memory JAM 9133-2, 1997); recording made in 1967.

70:3:00-3:05 into “Oh Lord” (a.k.a., “Fox Chase”), track 5 on Rev. Gary Davis, Live at Gerde’s Folk City – February, 1962 (Stefan Grossman’s Guitar Workshop SGGW114/5/6, 2009); recorded in 1962.

Each of Davis’s chase tunes share rhythmic, melodic, and imitative characteristics, yet no two are exactly alike, either amongst themselves or when compared to any other performer, Terry included. This supports the contention that a tune such as the Fox or Coon Chase was less a clear-cut set piece or even part of a song family than it was an idea, a type of scene painting that became the impetus for flights of suggestive sound and improvisatory skill. Once the chase is on, it’s not about the arrangement but the moment.

The same could be said of his one train tune called “Birmingham Special,” which was also introduced by Davis as the “Birdhead Special” (an even more evocative title in terms of motion imagery). As Davis stated in one live performance, “Now we on our way to Tampa, Florida. Here what they call the Birdhead Special”72 (indeed, the Atlanta-Birmingham Special was a Seaboard line train that ran from 1915 as part of a route which connected Washington with Tampa74). And while he never reached the fanciful heights of say, Noah Lewis in “Chickasaw Special” (Victor V38581, 1929), Davis nonetheless

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72 Art Rosenbaum, liner notes to Art of Field Recording Vol. 1: Fifty Years of Traditional American Music Documented by Art Rosenbaum (Dust-to-Digital DTD-08, 2007), 73.

73 On Bring Your Money, Honey!

74 Richard E. Prince, Seaboard Air Line Railway: Steam Boats, Locomotives, and History (Green River, Wyoming: Wheelwright Lithographing Co., 1966; reprint, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 204. There was a Norfolk, Virginia, harmonica player called Blues Birdhead (James Simons) who recorded a 78 for Okeh in 1929, and who may have taken his nickname from the same train line. At the very least, such a moniker would have played up the train connotations associated with harp players, whether it was self-bestowed or made up by the Okeh record label, which has been suggested – see Ron T. Curry, liner notes, Virginia Roots: The 1929 Richmond Sessions (Outhouse Records 1001, 2002).
offered an entertaining “ride” for audiences, becoming less the instrumental whiz than the engaging storyteller in his harp performances.

On a technical level, Davis favored playing in cross-harp, a.k.a., second position (defined as playing a fourth below the harp’s given key to effect blue notes in the scale of the new key), although we have one performance of “Birmingham Special” from Bring Your Money, Honey!, played as straight harp, i.e., G in the key of G. He also favored ten-hole diatonic harps, though he played a sixteen-hole diatonic harp on at least two occasions: “Hold to God’s Unchanging Hand” on Say No to the Devil and the “Coon Chase” found on Live & Kickin’. According to Steve Tracy, the sixteen-hole harmonica was less common in the blues world (though Sonny Boy Williamson II played it with regularity later in life), but its sound – a rich, resonating rumble of lower chords – was well-suited to chord-heavy songs such as fox chases and train tunes.75

Davis did not purse his lips while playing – the usual approach to achieve single-note runs – nor did he do a lot of trilling, but instead used tongue blocking almost exclusively (placement of the tongue in the middle of the reed plate with holes open on either end), which gave him a big sound and allowed him to get thick chordal passages, double-stops, and octaves. As a result of this tongue-blocking technique, Davis was able to coax melodies – sometimes stated, more often implied – out of a song’s chord-dominant rhythms and textures (not unlike how he built melodies from chords in his guitar playing, actually). Repeated listens reveal a more complex set of micro-rhythms and riffs than the explosive wash of sound Davis’s harp at first suggests. The end result is that, without being the dazzler Terry was, Davis still achieved some beguiling results as a

75Steven C. Tracy, correspondence with author, 12 September 2009.
harpist. “I don’t think he’s thinking about playing the harp, I think he’s just playing the harp,” observed Memphis harp virtuoso Billy Gibson. “He’s in praise mode.”

He was also in “seeing” mode, and his secular set pieces on the harp were among the most visual music he ever made. Looking at the lyrics of blind musicians, as Luigi Monge has brilliantly done in several papers, has it rewards, but it can only take us so far into the music of Davis, whose most visually-heightened pieces tended to be programmatic instrumentals such as his “United States March” on guitar and the above-mentioned chase and train tunes on harp, which evoked scenarios of barking dogs, fleeing foxes, whistles blowing, and locomotives chugging down the track – painting, in other words, a deeply sensory experience, aural and visual, without the benefit of vision. It became, then, an ironic way to manipulate and “possess” what he had been denied: a blind man whose music could make an audience “see” what he wished them to see.

While Davis’s banjo tunes are relatively short – most clock in under three minutes – his harp pieces are just the opposite, with a few among the longest in all of his repertoire. Fourteen of his nineteen harp songs are over four minutes while three exceed six minutes. Secular examples can be explained to an extent through the context – country parties, dances, and the like – in which such songs would have been played, settings where the music had to last as long as the dancing. “Lost John,” for example, was noted as a song that could repeat at length until a particular dance had concluded.

Billy Gibson, interview by author, 4 March 2009.


But there seems to have been an element in his harp playing, exemplified by the length of many such performances, in which Davis not only thwarted the expectations of an audience who came to hear “hot” guitar picking, but where he was able to lose himself in song, escaping into a sound world where he wasn’t bound by such expectations.

Harmonica took Davis outside of himself and his circumstance, engaging his imagination in ways that the guitar (and his reputation on the guitar) couldn’t. The hypnotic head space he created allowed him to disappear, for a few minutes at a time anyway, into a place where he didn’t have to prove himself, and where the world operated per his rules. He never commented on such an idea, but he wouldn’t have had to, since the harmonica did it for him. There’s something liberating in his harp music as a result, if only because Davis feels liberated body and soul on these performances.

As a parting thought, it may not be mere coincidence that Davis reasserted his banjo and harmonica playing on the concert stage at a time when the Civil Rights struggle was in full swing. As affirmations of Davis’s past (and, by extension, the past of black America), these songs triggered deep-seated collective memory, one that insisted the old stories and songs would not be forgotten amid the striving and progress being made by younger generations of black Americans whose opportunities could only have come after the tacit protest of generations that “sang the master,” as Roger Abrahams stated. With that in mind, Davis’s banjo and harmonica repertoire operated less as a reminder of the old days and requisite hard times than of the dignity that such songs helped maintain amid difficult circumstances.
Finally, we are fortunate to have one recording of Davis on piano, the gospel number “God Will Take Care of You.” Davis recorded it during his 1969 Adelphi sessions, the same sessions that yielded his only studio banjo performance, and one can hear on it producer John Townley’s attempt to recreate a sort of church service by overdubbing backup singers who act as a faux congregation to Davis’s musical lead. The effect is beautiful and authentic in feel, not unlike the church service in which Allan Evans recorded Davis in the late 1950s.

Davis was not alone as a prewar acoustic guitarist who could play the piano, and several other blues guitarists knew their way around the ivories, including Skip James, Scrapper Blackwell, Tampa Red, Mississippi John Hurt, Son House, Bukka White, Henry Townsend, Peetie Wheatstraw, and possibly Blind Willie McTell (a multi-instrumentalist who also played the accordion, banjo, kazoo, and harmonica). Yet when, where, and how Davis learned piano is a mystery. He told Stefan Grossman that he wasn’t very aware of the piano, down to how it was shaped, until he started to travel, which would not have been until his late teens. As odd as this may seem, it certainly was possible, since not all rural churches would have either allowed or been able to afford a piano, including possibly the Baptist church he attended as a child with his grandmother. Still, he would have come upon the instrument while at blind school; and his adult itinerant lifestyle would have also given him opportunities to hear – and learn – a little piano. For example,

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it is quite likely Davis practiced (if not taught himself) some piano while living in Durham at 410 Poplar, which had such an instrument on the premises.  

Despite the constant comparison he made between his secular guitar playing and the piano, Davis claimed that he never learned blues on piano, stating, “I didn’t have no time for piano or organ. I stuck to the guitar because I could carry that with me. I couldn’t carry no piano!” And while that may be, it appears Davis knew at least a secular tune or two on the instrument, judging from an eyewitness account we have by Willie Trice, whose uncle ran a juke joint called the Shady Rest out of the family house, which had a piano in it. Explained the North Carolina bluesman in later years to Bruce Bastin: “We had a piano sitting over there in the corner and somebody hit a note on the piano and Gary says, ‘Ain’t that a piano?’ I said, ‘Yes,’ and led him over to it. And he played the piano – played the same song he played on the guitar – sounded just like it.” Given the circumstance, we can only assume that Davis played a secular song – if not a blues – in such a setting.

It is tempting to think that Davis, who would have mostly learned music by ear, picked up at least some of his piano technique while at blind school. He learned to read some Braille at the South Carolina institute he attended and possibly would have encountered music via Braille notation as well. He had stated to a welfare caseworker in Durham that, while he didn’t know how to read music, he “presumed it was like other

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82 Bruce Bastin, Red River Blues, 247.
reading,” thereby intimating at least a passing familiarity with Braille notation.\textsuperscript{83} Other blind musicians certainly learned that way. Ray Charles was taught the notational system – developed in the nineteenth century by blind French organist Louis Braille\textsuperscript{84} – when the future rhythm and blues legend attended the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind in St. Augustine. As Charles explained, he would read the music with the right hand while playing with the left, switch out hands, then combine the two, memorizing several bars at a time until the piece was under the fingers. Said the keyboardist of the arduous task: “We’d learn maybe ten more bars and play the twelve then learn twenty more and play the thirty-two. . . . The roughest things were the classics. Some of them might have two hundred bars.”\textsuperscript{85}

A 1915 report by Spartanburg’s South Carolina School for the Deaf and the Blind, where Davis was admitted Aug. 26, 1914, and where he left less than a year later (citing the bad food), stated that three new pianos had been added to the music department, and

\textsuperscript{83}Ibid., 172.

\textsuperscript{84}Though used primarily as a reading system, Braille was initially developed by its namesake inventor as a way for the blind to read music. While a student at Paris’s National Institute for the Blind, Louis Braille adapted the technique of raised dots that had been devised as a military code by Charles Barbier for Napoleon, proposing in his 1829 publication, \textit{Procédé pour Écrire les Paroles, la Musique et la Plain-Chant au Moyen de Points}, the use of a six-dot cell with one code for alphabet and the other for music – see Bettye Krolick, \textit{Dictionary of Braille Music Signs} (Washington, D. C.: National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, Library of Congress, 1979), ix-xi. The need was certainly there at the time Braille devised his notational system, with some fifty blind organists working in Paris alone. Yet to this day Braille as a musical system has not caught on. For starters, an international standard for Braille musical notation was not fully realized until 1992; before then, blind musicians of different nationalities often couldn’t read the same score. In addition, scores can get unwieldy, both in size – e.g., forty-six pages of Braille notation to transcribe Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata – and for sight-reading practicality. See Doris G. Herlein, “Music Reading for the Sightless: Braille Notation,” \textit{Music Educators Journal} 62, no. 1 (September 1975): 42-45; Maxine Pilcher, “Resources for Teaching Music to the Blind,” \textit{Music Educators Journal} 51, no. 2 (November-December 1964): 67; Frances A. Koestler, \textit{The Unseen Minority: A Social History of Blindness in the United States} (New York: David McKay Company, 1976), 96-97; and Muriel K. Mooney, “Blind Children Need Training, Not Sympathy,” \textit{Music Educators Journal} 58, no. 8 (April 1972): 58.

it’s conceivable Davis would have been among those who benefited from one of the purchases, segregated though the school was with a “Department for Colored Pupils.” If Davis had received any formal training on keyboards there – and it appears he at least had some exposure to organ playing at blind school – it would have given Davis enough of an understanding of musical relationships to support claims by some of his students that he could identify chordal structures and relationships, including inversions, on the guitar. Davis’s rendition of “God Will Take Care of You” confirms that he also knew those same musical relationships on the piano, closely following as it does the song as initially published in 1905’s Songs of Redemption and Praise and subsequent collections such as Gospel Pearls.

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88John Townley, interview by author, 8 February 2009; and Ernie Hawkins, interview by author, 8 August 2008, Fur Peace Ranch, Pomeroy, Ohio, tape recording.

89Written in 1904, the text to “God Will Take Care of You” was penned by Civilla D. Martin (who also wrote the text to “His Eye Is on the Sparrow”) with music by her evangelist husband, Baptist minister W. Stillman Martin. As the story goes, Rev. Martin had been visiting the Practical Bible Training School in Lestershire, New York, where he was helping the school’s president, John D. Davis, prepare what would become Songs of Redemption and Praise. While there, he had a preaching engagement that took him away from his wife, who had become ill, but who was inspired to write the words to the hymn after their young son had explained that God would take care of her during his father’s absence. See Kenneth W. Osbeck, 101 More Hymn Stories: The Inspiring True Stories Behind 101 Favorite Hymns (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1985), 106-107.


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90 Thanks to Memphis pianist Ben Banti for advice on the transcription.
The harmonic progression of each is as follows:

Original:  \[ \begin{align*}
\text{I} &/ / \text{I}_{6} / / \text{ii}_{6} / / \text{V/vi} / / \text{ii}_{6} \text{V} / / \text{I}_{6/4} / / \text{V} / / \text{I} / / \text{IV}_{6/4} / / \text{I} / / \\
\end{align*} \]

Davis:  \[ \begin{align*}
\text{I}_{6/4} / / \text{I}_{6} / / \text{IV} / / \text{V}_{6/vi} / / \text{IV} / / \text{I}_{6/4} / / \text{V} / / \text{I} / / \text{IV}_{6} / / \text{I} / / \\
\end{align*} \]

Davis’s arrangement shows faithfulness to the original that extends to the harmonic motion, use of fermatas, and spacing of the chords. In the four measures shown above, Davis not only uses the same striking V/vi borrowed chord in the second measure, but he adheres by and large to the original’s musical pauses and, at times, harmonic inversions, utilizing the same second inversion set-up of the I chord into the final cadence as well as its closing plagal passage. One subtle difference is his treatment of the harmony in the first three beats of measure two. In the original, it operates essentially as a ii6 chord under the melody, while Davis treats it as a IV chord with accented neighbor tones in the top.

The change in key from C to B-flat by Davis, however, suggests that he may have come by the song via the version found in Gospel Pearls, where it was transposed down a step to B-flat but otherwise retained the same closed-voice arrangement. Published in 1921 by the National Baptist Convention, the slim volume of 163 hymns and devotional songs became among the most widely used sacred song collections for African Americans in its day, and Davis the Baptist minister would have surely been familiar with its contents. That he was exposed to the song through a published version is

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91 Paul Oliver, Songsters & Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 219. Gospel Pearls, which was largely responsible for spreading the reputations of such composers as Charles Tindley and Lucie Campbell, was the first African American sacred songbook to use the term “gospel” in its title; see Horace Clarence Boyer, “Charles Albert Tindley: Progenitor of African American Gospel Music,” in We’ll Understand It Better By and By: Pioneering African American Gospel Composers, ed. Bernice Johnson Reagon (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 53.
reinforced by the fact that he sings verbatim three of the four printed verses found in *Songs of Redemption and Praise* and *Gospel Pearls* (Davis rarely committed completely to pre-existing verse in his music). Yet blindness if not blind school may have also played a role in Davis’s treatment of the hymn.\(^92\) For a blind musician, transcribing music into a key like B-flat meant that much of a song could be technically executed on the raised black keys, where the pentatonic notes common to black folk music inherently fall anyway. This approach, of course, would have allowed Davis to better “feel” his way through the keys in a way that would have been much more tactile for a blind musician.\(^93\)

In addition, the singing of such a tune in blind school would have held special relevance to disabled persons, thanks to a text that promotes an abiding faith in God amid the travails of life; specific to “God Will Take Care of You” are stanzas that address uncertainty, danger, material need, and temptation. As one person noted, “What more perfect hymn for a blind person!”\(^94\) Indeed, the song’s theme of a watchful God must have appealed deeply to Davis, who faced strife and vulnerability on a daily basis as a blind street performer, and who would have found solace in a hymn that allowed him to “feel” his way through a harsh, uncaring world.

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\(^92\)Other versions of the hymn have been set in B-flat as well, including its appearance in more recent songbooks such as *The New Century Hymnal* (Cleveland, Ohio: the Pilgrim Press, 1995), 460.

\(^93\)John Townley interview by author, 8 February 2009. Andy Cohen also saw Davis play piano once, noting that he played an unidentified improvisation on the black keys in the key of F-sharp (conversation with author, 3 August 2009). Davis was not alone in playing predominantly on the black keys of a piano – Irving Berlin did as well and managed to write more than 3,000 songs with such a “handicap.”

\(^94\)Larkin Bryant, conversation with author, 12 August 2009, Memphis, Tennessee.
“YOU CAN HEAR THINGS BETTER THAN YOU CAN SEE ’EM SOMETIMES”: BLINDNESS IN THE LIFE AND MUSIC OF REVEREND GARY DAVIS

Blindness not only shaped Reverend Gary Davis as a person and musician but acted in tandem with his religious convictions, his identity as an African American, and other aspects of self to provide the kind of fortitude, personally and musically, that allowed him to accomplish what he did. Blindness as a dominant trope for Davis, in fact, cannot be overstated. Though he rarely talked about his condition, the manifestations of this disability in his music and life were often the only commentary needed.

This chapter will explore Davis’s blindness, place it in context among blind populations in general and the blind musicians of his generation, and offer ways in which his music can better be appreciated through the lens of his blindness. As Davis once said during a performance of “Buck Dance, “You can hear things better than you can see ’em sometimes.”

Davis’s story is not so different from that of other blind musicians who honed an empowering skill that deflected societal judgment and bias – the latter often acting as a catalyst to spur on the former. Malian guitarist Amadou Bagayoko, half of a blind duo with wife Mariam Doumbia, is but one musician to have made that point, telling an interviewer, “The music itself gave us the strength to overcome the blindness, so you cannot separate the two.”

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A brief history on blindness in musical cultures of the world will help elucidate the often tangible connections between the two, and it bears mentioning that, in discussing the blindness of Davis and other musicians, an effort has been made to treat it not in exotic or exaggerated terms – or, even worse, as a problem – but as a normative conditional state, a position frequently advocated by the blind in their desire to be treated fairly and have fuller societal participation. As Stevie Wonder once stated, “I never really wondered much about my blindness or asked questions about it, because to me, really, being blind was normal.”

It is safe to say that all cultures and societies have had members who were blind. It is almost always a small percentage, even when health care isn’t adequate and disease is widespread. Yet at various points in history, the blind have been far from a fringe element culturally, especially in the field of music where certain styles not only encouraged the contributions of blind performers – American pre-WWII blues and gospel, for example – but were largely developed and defined by such performers, as in Portuguese fado.

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5In Portugal in the early twentieth century the working-class music of fado spilled into the streets and its blind population, who were often given nothing more than a begging box from the government. To survive, they sang and played the guitarra for change, making crucial contributions to the genre’s development (and the comparisons are ripe between the practitioners of this traditional form and American folk-blues at the turn of the last century, including the itinerant nature of the performers, the use of “lead boys” to get around, and the subsequent influence on a national style by those from the lowest rung of society); see Paul Vernon, A History of the Portuguese Fado (Ashgate: Brookfield, Ver., 1998), 18-19.
Various societies have made allowances for the blind as musicians – one of the few activities welcome to disabled persons in their respective societies – and most of the time that has meant playing on the street and other such public places, performing music that is often religious or quasi-religious in nature to garner sympathy from those inclined to toss spare change their way. In India, for example, blind musicians who sing devotional songs that confront the illusionary nature of this world are among three types of mendicants alongside the snake charmer and jogi. Many such players, then and now, have existed in underdeveloped areas, where a lack of technology and the buttressing of superstition can go hand in hand, where, at its worst, blindness acts as a symbol for darkness and can equate itself with dark forces, the devil and death. Yet whether they are shunned or respected (and the feelings can coexist), or whether blindness is thought of as karmic debt or a means to magically communicate with higher powers, a common, pan-cultural face frequently emerges in blind musicians, who are frequently skilled technicians on their instruments, often to the point of being cutting edge though they can also be a conservative agent in preserving local and regional folk traditions. Yet they must do their work from the lowest rungs of society, living a hardscrabble life in which they face a number of obstacles and threats to both personal and social security. Economic necessity has driven many a blind street mendicant to music to avoid being stigmatized as a mere “beggar,” but other motivations exist, including the chance to excel in a socially acceptable and rewarded form of expression, and by extension, maintain a

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sense of dignity and integration within a society that may classify the blind as a type of outsider if not pariah. Then there are the simpler motivations that recreation, pleasure, and personal satisfaction provide. For those without a visual reference into the world, music takes on a significant role, becoming even more important in the blind’s experiential attitudes toward beauty.\(^8\)

Still, from ancient times, blind musicians have often been held in high regard.\(^9\)

They have been viewed as innovators, virtuosos, or even guides and intercessors between

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\(^9\)Despite the historical contributions of blind musicians, very little has been written in depth about the social, cultural and creative issues of blindness as related to music. Instead, the literature, by and large, has concerned itself with scientific factors surrounding music and blindness or, within music education circles, teaching methodologies for the blind student. Among an emerging body of newer research, however, have been articles on the role of blindness in prewar blues and gospel music by Luigi Monge – “The Language of Blind Lemon Jefferson: The Covert Theme of Blindness,” *Black Music Research Journal* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 35-81; and “Blindness Blues: Visual References in the Lyrics of Blind Prewar Blues and Gospel Musicians,” in *The Lyrics in African American Popular Music*, ed. Robert Springer, 91-119 (Bern: Peter Lang, 2001) – as well as Terry Rowden’s slim, consolidating overview, *The Songs of Blind Folk: African American Musicians and the Cultures of Blindness* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009). An interesting side note of a paper comes from A. J. Whittaker, who finds parallels between blind blues singers and the original blind bard(s), Homer, noting that the reliance on oral tradition, use of epithet-noun structures in the poetry, and similarities of metrical scheme are among shared elements between ancient Greek folksong and the blues – a stretch perhaps but worth mulling over if one should take a deeper look at the scansion and construct of music intrinsically tied to the blind in various world cultures; see A. J. Whittaker, “Homer Sings the Blues,” *Greece & Rome*

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the physical and spiritual realms. Whether because of their perceived hypersensitivity to sound and music, the ability to “see” inward, or the overall status of “otherness,” blind musicians have been associated with religion and ritual as a kind of shamanic representative, a musical performer whose inner life, already more finely attuned than the average person, necessitates a role that requires inner entreaty and divination. Numerous tomb paintings and carvings in ancient Egypt, for example, show blind male harpers, a common subcategory of instrumentalists, depicted in both natural and blindfolded states (as were priests), indicating the role was not only religious but symbolic, i.e., that the beauty of the music rather than one’s sight granted access to a deity.10

Through the ages, special note has been made of the skill and advanced technical prowess of blind performers, as if being blind invited extra powers of musical perception, touch, and communication. In the fifteenth century, Italian philosopher Johanan Alemanno wrote of the blind German organist Conrad Paumann: “What happened to me is what happens to those who eat sweets made of honey and nectar: I was so conquered by his lovely playing that all spirits within me reached out to the sweetness of his sound.”11 Another writer traveling in Spain was impressed by the great Andalusian folk singer, Niña de la Puebla (Dolores Jiménez Alcántara), whose mastery of ornamentation and microtonal nuance prompted this response: “There is something about the blind singer which thrills an audience. Her singing seems to be concentrated entirely in herself


and the external world fades into insignificance.”¹² Even fellow performers can be carried away by the blind’s musical skills, such as the following singer, accompanied by a church organist who memorized an entire program for a vocal recital. “I have never had a more beautiful and accurate accompaniment played by anyone,” wrote the vocalist. “It was note-perfect – a fine musical background – a sheer joy to sing to in every way. If this is what blind musicians can do, I would rather sing with them than those who have sight.”¹³

Beginning with legendary bard Homer, the image of the blind bard has held sway in the collective imagination of many societies, notably in the Balkans where the oral epic tradition was taken to a high level of national art by blind singer and bowed lute gusle player Filip Višnjić (1767-1834) and kept alive in more recent times by fellow blind (usually male) singers and players of the gusle such as the itinerant blind beggars in Macedonia who sing long, historical ballads accompanied on a three-string gusla lute,¹⁴ and their Serbian guslar counterparts.¹⁵ But one could make similar arguments for the heike biwa of Japan, the kobzarstvo of the Ukraine and, in Gaelic history, such figures as fifteenth-century ode singer Henry the Minstrel (“Blind Harry”). For centuries in Europe,


¹³Gerrish Ball, “Blind Organists,” The Musical Times 83, no. 1198 (December 1942): 380. Not everyone has been convinced. In his landmark volume, The Singer of Tales, in which Albert B. Lord built on Milman Parry’s work in oral epic song by examining the role of formulaic expression, he found that the romantic notion of the “blind bard” was perhaps just that, a myth, at least when it concerned the blind Yugoslavian singers and players of the gusle he encountered who were not very skilled performers; see Albert B. Lord, The Singer of Tales (London: Harvard University Press, 1960), 18-20. Lord placed more weight on the roles played by illiteracy and the desire to perfect one’s craft in shaping a good performer of Yugoslavian oral epic poetry.


blind organists enjoyed the patronage and support of the Catholic Church, culminating, one could argue, with the invention of Braille initially as a notation system for the cadre of blind organists working in nineteenth century Paris.\(^\text{16}\)

We find performers who lack sight in almost every context, from a blind gamelan ensemble in Indonesia\(^\text{17}\) to blind cantastorie broadside singers/guitarists in Sicily\(^\text{18}\) to blind ud players, many of Jewish descent, who operated out of Bagdad in the mid twentieth century.\(^\text{19}\) More to the point, certain instruments and styles have been intimately linked to blind performers – in Serbia, for example, the aforementioned gusle was so associated with blind performers, that schools for the blind in the early 1900s included training on the instrument.\(^\text{20}\)

\(^{16}\)Among the many organists who were fully or largely blind: famed Italian composer Francesco Landini in the fourteenth century; Germans Arnolt Schlick and Conrad Paumann in the fifteenth century (the latter was a lutenist as well, one who is said to have invented a German form of lute notation); Antonio de Cabezón, Francisco Sacedo, and Francisco Salinas of Spain, and the Italian Antonio Valente, in the sixteenth century; the Flemish player Guillaume Huet, Dutchman Pieter Alewijnszoon de Vois, Giovanni Carisio of Italy, and Pablo Nassarre of Spain in the seventeenth century; Dutchmen J. J. de Graff, Daniël Brachtuyzer, and Jacob Potholt, John Stanley and Samuel Cooke of England, Maria Theresia Paradis of Austria, and the Italian Allesandro Fridzeri in the eighteenth century; Frenchmen Augustin Baré, Louis Vierne, and most famously Louis Braille in the nineteenth century, as well as Bohemian Josef Labor, and Englishmen Jonas Blewitt, Alfred Hollins, John Purkis, and Matthew Cook who, alongside Braille, devised a system by which the blind could read music; and Frenchmen Jean-Pierre Leguay, Gaston Litaize, André Marchal, Jean Langlais, and Louis Thiry in the twentieth century, as well as David Liddle (b. 1960). This list does not take into account a number of Western art organists/composers who went blind late in life such as J. S. Bach, Handel and Delius. That such a strongly religious tradition has been guided in part by the musical impulses and training of blind composers and players is worth further investigation (as is the pagan shadow that no doubt trails the storied virtues of blind musicians in the early years of the Church); indeed no book has yet been written to address this curiously consistent lineage of keyboardists.


\(^{19}\)Shlomo Deshen, Blind People: The Private and Public Life of Sightless Israelis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 64.

The hurdy-gurdy was commonly associated in medieval and renaissance Europe with blind mendicants who performed traditional material on their makeshift instruments, and even into the early twentieth century, blind hurdy-gurdy players were popular over a large swath of Eastern Europe from parts of Poland and Russia to most of Belarus and all of the Ukraine.\textsuperscript{21}

One of the longest standing traditions for blind musicians has been the Celtic harp. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Ireland and Scotland, music, especially that of the harp, was the accepted profession for the blind\textsuperscript{22} as it was in Wales,\textsuperscript{23} a situation that fostered such hailed players as harper Roderick Morison, better known as Rory Dall (i.e., “Blind Rory” – “dall” meaning blind; a number of blind harpers were in fact identified by the appellation, not unlike the many bluesmen who had “Blind” in front of their names). History is indeed rife with the mention of blind Celtic harpists such as Welsh triple harp virtuoso John Parry (1710-1782), Denis Hempson (1697-1807), who because of his long age was able to keep medieval harp practice and repertoire alive into the nineteenth century,\textsuperscript{24} Irishman Arthur O’Neill, and of course the most famous Irish

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harpist of them all, Turlough Carolan (1670-1738), one of several blind harpers credited with composing “Danny Boy.”

In his historical account of Scottish music Sir John Graham Dalyell noted that, while the harp was the instrument of choice in Ireland, it was standard practice to teach the blind how to play the violin in Scotland. Indeed, one finds the influence of Famous George Stark, “Da Blin’ Fiddler” of Dundee, on the Shetland Isles style of fiddling.

Many accomplished street musicians in and around Cuzco have been blind, notably Andean harp players. In recent times, they have included well-known players Gabriel Aragón, Don Antonio Sulca, and Leandro Apaza, who released an album with blind mandolinist Benjamin Clara billed as “The Blind Street Musicians of Cuzco.”

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25Others possible authors of “Danny Boy” include Rory Dall Morrison, Rory Dall O’Cahan, Denis O’Hampsey, and nineteenth-century blind fiddler Jimmy McCurry; see Winnie Czulinski, *Drone On! The High History of Celtic Music* (Toronto: Sound and Vision, 2004), 103. At a rather famous Belfast convocation in 1792, six of the attending ten harpers were blind, including Denis Hempson, while in 1808 (St. Patrick’s Day, to be exact), a Belfast Harp Society formed specifically to teach the harp to blind students in an effort to resurrect the instrument’s reputation as one of national pride; see Sir John Graham Dalyell, *Musical Memories of Scotland with Historical Annotations and Numerous Illustrative Plates* (Edinburgh: Thomas G. Stevenson, 1849; reprint, Norwood, Penn.: Norwood Editions, 1973), 247-48. One unintended result of such events and organizations was that they continued to reinforce the notion that the best harpists had to be blind; S. C. Lanier, “‘It Is New-Strung and Shan’t Be Heard’: Nationalism and Memory in the Irish Harp Tradition,” *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 8 (1999): 11.


All documented nineteenth century Ukrainian minstrels were blind, and blind bandura-playing kobzari minstrels and their hurdy-gurdy counterpart, the lirnyky, have been integral in the development of the region’s folk music. These minstrels were rope-making villagers part of the year and roamed as musicians the rest, singing a combination of epic tales (dumy) and religious psal’my which lent them a certain “moral authority.” They were also indoctrinated into church-affiliated guilds that both preserved musical tradition and molded the blind mendicants into first-rate performers. As in other cultures, such minstrels were at once reviled and revered, the combination of negative stereotyping through the blind’s association with poverty, begging, debauchery and crime (up to and including devilish alliances) but also their curious absolution as a saintly lot – according to folkloric legend, they were nothing less than the proselytizing descendents of the Apostles.

In China, the first documented court musician, Shi Kuang in the sixth century BC, was blind, while a blind musicians guild dates back to 200 BC. In the years spanning the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, a tradition of blind female singers in tea houses

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30 Natalie Kononenko, Ukrainian Minstrels: And the Blind Shall Sing (Armonk, N. Y.: M. E. Sharp, 1998), 116. Writes the author, “No man became a minstrel because of his musical and poetic abilities; a man became a minstrel because he was blind;” ibid., 65.


33 Kononenko, 33-34, 133.
and homes helped mold Cantonese opera song.\textsuperscript{34} The most famous folk song figure in modern China, Hua Yanjun (1893-1950), was blind, which connected his music in the minds of Chinese citizenry to the working class and “downtrodden.”\textsuperscript{35} Affectionately known as Blind Abing, he played on the streets, singing and performing on the \textit{pipa} and \textit{erhu} – the latter instrument especially linked to blind Chinese street performers who would announce themselves with the bowed strains of an \textit{erhu} as they approached a village.\textsuperscript{36} And a troupe of blind traditional musicians, the Zuoquan Blind Men’s Publicity Team, began as rural buskers before banding together in what became a popular promotional arm of the Chinese Communist Party in the 1940s.\textsuperscript{37}

Blind musicians flourished for centuries in Japan, often as the direct instigators of repertoire, instrumentation, and style in both folk and \textit{gagaku} court music.\textsuperscript{38}

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\textsuperscript{35}Jonathan P. J. Stock, \textit{Musical Creativity in Twentieth-Century China: Abing, His Music, and Its Changing Meanings}, (Rochester, N. Y.: University of Rochester Press, 1996), 43. Not all was rosy between folk music and the Chinese government, however. Shawm bands, sometimes with blind players, were generally belittled, as was Abing by later Daoists, 57.\\
\textsuperscript{36}Ibid., 62.\\
\textsuperscript{37}“Making Music Out of Darkness,” \textit{China Daily}, 20 October 2003.\\
\textsuperscript{38}Two book-length works on Japan’s blind musicians are available in the West. Ingrid Fritsch’s tome, \textit{Japans blinde Sänger im Schutz der Gottheit Myōon-Benzaiten} (Munich: Iudicum Verlag, 1996) traces the historical roles of various blind musical orders in Japanese society – the \textit{biwa}, \textit{moso}, \textit{goze}, and \textit{itako}, as well as the guilds which held such traditions intact for centuries – noting that the blind served an ambiguous function, at once relegated to the sidelines of society since their affliction was seen as karmic recompense, and yet bestowed with magical and religious attributes. Gerald Groemer, a leading Western expert in the field of Japanese traditional music, has written extensively about blind musicians and their guilds and sums up much of his findings in \textit{The Spirit of Tsugaru: Blind Musicians, Tsugaru-jamisen, and the Folk Music of Northern Japan} (Warren, Mich.: Harmonie Park Press, 1999), which looks at blind male \textit{shamisen} musicians (called \textit{bosama}, or \textit{Tsugaru-jamisen}) from the rural north-western Honshu province of Tsugaru against the larger backdrop of blind musicians in Japanese society and culture. The \textit{bosama} sang narrative songs called \textit{kudoki}, thriving outside the rigid almost caste-like system of the professional guilds under which most blind musicians worked – outsiders even by outsider standards. The book offers many transcriptions of song melodies and presents a life history of a modern-day \textit{bosama}, Takahasi Chikuzan, among the last of a dying breed who gave Groemer his story.
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chamber music in Japan was made by blind ensembles,\textsuperscript{39} while the spread of shamisen music, cultivated initially by blind biwa players, was the result of blind male performers in the Kansai region during the Edo period.\textsuperscript{40} The flowering of koto playing and repertoire was linked to a blind musicians’ guild dating from the sixteenth century,\textsuperscript{41} and to this day, blind shakuhachi and koto players have persisted as a cultural identifier in the Japanese mind.\textsuperscript{42}

In the eighth century, purification rituals were linked to blind priests who played the biwa, and the first millennium introduction of the biwa from China (where it was known as the pipa) paired it to a secret repertoire known supposedly by a tenth century blind player.\textsuperscript{43} From then on, biwa players were typically blind, singing of the futility of existence, an apt subject perhaps for someone who suffered such a disability.\textsuperscript{44} The most famous Japanese epic, Heike Monogatari (The Tales of the Heike), was a long narrative sung by blind biwa players, who established a guild, the tödö, in the fourteenth century to protect their economic and political interests including the market share they maintained


\textsuperscript{42}Gerald P. Dyck, “They Also Serve.” Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology 2, no. 2 (1975): 205.


\textsuperscript{44}Ibid., 645.
in the recitation of epics. The highest ranking tônô musicians even enjoyed the privileges of priests and were the only ones allowed to compose, perform and teach biwa, shamisen, and koto music.

Finally, the participation of blind female performers has been crucial to Japan’s musical history. In the nineteenth century, broadside type songs were created by female singers (yomiuri) who were sometimes blind. They sang topical songs of the day, often accompanied on shamisen or percussion, and borrowed elements of style and repertoire from the earlier goze. A group of blind female performers, the goze formed during the Edo period, were of lowly status, and were known for their abilities at improvising shamisen songs on the day’s events. Their guild seems to have come about as a sensible means of protection and safety, where “their strongest protection was their infirmity and blindness, which put the population under a pious obligation.” Intriguingly, the goze moved about in social circles by means of both their music and disability, one reinforcing the other within confines of status, class, and gender. A group of blind female shamans, the itako, are considered folk healers, exorcists, and diviners who use a combination of vocal and instrumental music for the purpose of ceremonial chants.

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since the Meiji Restoration of the 1870s, the *itako* remain a form of folk expression in parts of Japan, offering a way for the sick outcast of a community, much like the *itako* themselves, to be welcomed back into the fold. Their blindness, a destiny beyond their control, makes them “chosen” to be such shamans,\(^{50}\) where ritual allows the blind female, doubly marginalized by Japanese standards, to transcend not only the immediate physicality of the world through ceremony but the finiteness of one’s lot in life.

Among the earliest known blind African American musicians was Georgian pianist Thomas Green Wiggins Bethune, a.k.a., “Blind Tom” (1849-1908), a supposed idiot savant who toured from 1857 (while still a slave) to 1905 as a popular concert artist playing memorized tunes on demand as well as dances, marches, program pieces, and other original compositions\(^{51}\) (and one has to wonder how much of his idiot savant classification came about the result of being blind, black, and a virtuoso, a perhaps unexplainable combination for the white antebellum South used to the stereotypical portrayal of blacks\(^{52}\)). A generation later, another blind African American, John William “Blind” Boone (1864-1927) distinguished himself on the piano\(^{53}\). Blinded as an infant


\(^{52}\) Southall questions the validity as well of Blind Tom’s categorization as “idiot,” citing, for example, his ability to comprehend rigorous music theory exams that were administered to him; see Geneva Southall, “Blind Tom: A Misrepresented and Neglected Composer-Pianist,” 146.

when his eyes were removed to stop “brain fever,” Boone attended the Missouri Institute for the Education of the Blind, where his musical proclivities were nurtured. A practitioner of both classical and ragtime repertoire, he toured under such slogans as “We Travel on Our Merit, Not Sympathy” and apparently matched if not bested Blind Tom in a cutting contest from 1880.\textsuperscript{54} One composition of his, “Southern Rag Medley, No. 2,” even has the distinct left hand bass pattern of what would become boogie-woogie by the 1930s.\textsuperscript{55}

Fascination for extraordinarily gifted blind musicians continues to this day. Some of the best, most creative blind players who have achieved acclaim if not fame and fortune include soul icons Ray Charles and Stevie Wonder, guitar stylists José Feliciano and Doc Watson, jazz greats Art Tatum and Rahsaan Roland Kirk, and an Italian superstar, classical tenor Andrea Bocelli. In non-Western music, noted blind performers extend to the aforementioned duo Amadou and Mariam from Mali; an award-winning blind percussion quartet Tasûrûm from Korea;\textsuperscript{56} Taiwanese vocalist Yang Xiuqing; saz-playing minstrel Ashik Veysel of Turkey; the Egyptian Al Nour Wal Amal [“Light and Hope”] orchestra, a thirty-four-member chamber ensemble of blind girls who play

\textsuperscript{54}Ibid., 228-29.

\textsuperscript{55}Ibid., 238.

Western and Arabic classical music;\textsuperscript{57} and Kenyan \textit{makwaya} artist Mary Atieno, whose blindness helped make her a star in the East and Central African gospel music scene.\textsuperscript{58}

As the above examples suggest, the perceptions and roles of blind musicians have been surprisingly consistent throughout world cultures: music historically has been one of the few viable alternatives to begging for a poor blind person; blind musicians are often relegated to the fringes of society where they may be treated with pity if not disdain or ridicule, but where, without certain expectations of conformity, they are also in a position to better innovate;\textsuperscript{59} and the otherness of the blind musician can also elevate that player to magical/religious status, someone who is equipped to commune with the unseen world or, in the secular realm, someone who has attained the level of virtuoso or musical visionary.\textsuperscript{60}

In addition, several studies have shown that economic necessity is not the only reason music has attracted so many blind people regardless of time or place. In a 1975 article, author Gerald P. Dyck chronicled eleven blind Thai street musicians, amateur and professional alike, from \textit{khaēn} mouth organists to players of the \textit{salō} (two-string bowed

\textsuperscript{57}The orchestra is a branch of the same-named charitable organization founded in Cairo in 1954 to oversee the rights and opportunities for blind women in Egypt. See their website, \texttt{http://www.alnourwalamal.org}.


\textsuperscript{59}Because artists have the ability to challenge the status quo and offer new emergent paradigms of expression, they can be both admired and feared, at once relegated away from the center of the community but a necessary component nonetheless; see Richard Bauman, \textit{Verbal Art as Performance} (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1977), 45. Such implications, of course, are intensified further when blind musicians, with their own marginal status, are the creators.

\textsuperscript{60}That these perceptions/stereotypes hold true into the twenty-first century can be found in a recent newspaper article about Nobuyuki Tsujii, the first blind performer to win the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, who was described as swaying his head “like Ray Charles or Stevie Wonder” and taking listeners into a “magical world.” Even the story’s headline reinforced the musician’s outsider status. See Lela Garlington, “Blind Pianist Takes Audience on Otherworldly Musical Trip,” \textit{Commercial Appeal} (Memphis, Tennessee), 29 April 2010, sec. B, p. 1.
lute) and sung (four-string plucked lute). He concluded that such musicians were often itinerant, mostly played in public markets and at temples, were usually self-taught, and performed a mix of traditional and popular music. Their backgrounds were similar as well: childhood blindness combined with dire family circumstance and the subsequent adoption of a musical skill to survive. Dyck’s other finding, however, is just as significant. Aside from a way to make money, music is therapeutic for blind players; spiritual fulfillment, in fact, becomes the impetus along with financial reward and sensory appeal for these blind musicians.

A similar conclusion is reached by author Simon Ottenberg in Seeing with Music, which assembles life histories on three blind musicians from Sierra Leone who play the kututeng (lamellophone, or thumb piano) and is among the best in a short list of books about blindness in music and culture. His findings fly in the face of perceived wisdom in that, in this particular region and culture, at least, blind musicians are an atypical phenomenon with little tolerance or aid within a village, they don’t necessarily perform for tips, and they are hampered by the view that music made on the kutukeng is only for children and thus not to be taken seriously by adults, blind or not.

The result is that blind men who play the kutukeng do it in large part because it is pleasing and therapeutic. Like the guitar in American blues and street gospel, the kutukeng lamellophone is a suitable instrument for such musicians. It is portable, light,

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61Dyck, “They Also Serve,” 205-216.

62Most postnatal blindness in Thai infants is caused by conjunctivitis. Often what follows is the harmful folk remedy of blowing on the eyes, which tends to exacerbate the problem, ibid., 214-15.


64Ibid., 17, 64, 97.
not tied to any specific ceremony or time of year, can be played solo, is easy to learn, acts in a self-contained call and response with the voice, and does not need an audience to elicit satisfaction; it is, in short, “an ideal instrument for a lonely person at Bafodea.”

The blind kutukeng player, then, by choosing his particular instrument and repertoire in a society that offers no encouragement for either, plays instead for himself, in an effort to stave off loneliness and provide a sense of identity and social belonging, if only with like-minded kutukeng players.

Within folklore and popular culture of the United States, polarized, exaggerated views of the blind and blind musicians have long been reinforced. On one end, the blind might provide taunts for a child’s folk rhyme –

Oh blin’ man! Oh blin’ man!
You cain’t never see.
Just tu’n `round three times
You cain’t ketch me.

Oh tu’n Eas’! Oh tu’n Wes’!
Ketch us if you can.
Did you thought dat you’d cotch us,
Mistah blin’ man?

On the other end, there was praise and amazement when it came to the musical virtuosity of blind players, something that reached romanticized extremes in the following turn-of-the-century poem about Blind Tom:

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65Ibid., 54, 136.

66Ibid., 171-72, 177, 188-89. The blind organist Alfred Hollins (1865-1942) mirrored this thought when he wrote, “Any child who is alone and does not mix with other children must of necessity invent strange methods of amusement, and much more is this so with a blind child;” see Alfred Hollins, A Blind Musician Looks Back: An Autobiography (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1936), 21.

He turned those sightless eyes to God,
His thoughts in fields of fancy trod,
Where songs unsung and notes unheard,
And sweeter sounds than song of bird,
Floating on vapory mists of light,
Descended 'round the poor blind wight,
Plashing like rain drops o'er the keys!
And sobbed in tender symphonies
O'er flowery dells where silver streams
Fell tinkling thro' a land of dreams

For well we knew that where he stood,
The blind musician talked with God;
Nor did we doubt the silent prayer
Was granted as we watched him there;
For even as he turned to go,
We heard him singing, sweet and low:
“A starry crown I’m a-goin’ foh to wear,
A starry crown I’m a-goin’ foh to wear,
A starry crown I’m a-goin’ foh to wear –
O, sinner, fare you well.”

Mostly, a good cathartic tug on the listener’s heartstrings was the norm, as
reflected in sentimental ballads such as “The Poor Orphan Child,” “The Two Orphans,”
“The Blind Boy’s Lament,” “The Blind Fiddler,” “The Blind Man and His Child,” and
“The Blind Child’s Prayer,” about a grieving blind girl who misses her dead mother so
much she joins her in heaven – as singer Myrtle Love Hester noted of the latter, “You can
get tears out of this one most any time.”

By the early twentieth century, the popular dichotomy that segregated the blind
into camps of pity versus genius not only prevailed, it became something of a marketing

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69 Arnold Byron, Folk Songs of Alabama (University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1950), 79.
ploy by the recording industry (the strategy has endured – Stevie Wonder’s blindness was a selling point for Motown, for example⁷⁰). Gary Davis’s first records for ARC were listed simply as “Blind Gary,” while other artists whose records were branded with a “Blind” prefix (some simply pseudonyms) included Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Boy Fuller, Blind Blake (a.k.a., Blind Arthur and Blind George Martin), Blind Willie McTell (a.k.a., Blind Sammie and Blind Willie), Blind Willie Johnson (a.k.a., The Blind Pilgrim), Blind Joe Taggart (a.k.a., Blind Joel Taggart, Blind Joe Amos, Blind Tim Russell, and Blind Joe Donnell), Teddy Darby (Blind Darby, Blind “Blues” Darby, and Blind Squire Turner), Blind Willie Davis (a.k.a., Blind Willie Jackson), Blind Mamie Forehand, Blind Benny Paris, Blind Roosevelt Graves, Blind Gussie Nesbit, Blind Richard Yates, Blind Leroy Garnett, Blind Joe Reynolds (a.k.a., Blind Willie Reynolds), Blind John Davis, Blind Connie Williams, Blind Clyde Church, Blind Willie Harris (possibly Richard “Rabbit” Brown) and such first-name-only identifiers as Blind Joe, Blind Pete, Blind Mack (Mack Rhinehart), Blind Norris (Norris McHenry), and Blind Percy. It was such a popular recording strategy that one musician, Bogus Ben Covington of the Birmingham Jug Band, apparently feigned his blindness.⁷¹

Both Blind Blake and Blind Lemon Jefferson’s biographical sketches in The Paramount Book of the Blues from 1927 indicate the extent to which labels exploited a

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⁷⁰Steve Lodder, Stevie Wonder: A Musical Guide to the Classic Albums (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2005), 34. Even African pop stars Amadou Bagayoko and wife Mariam Doumbia were billed early on as “The Blind Couple from Mali” and were in danger of being viewed as a novelty act. “It was complicated,” Bagayoko has said. “We were certainly from Mali and we were certainly blind, and you should remember that being blind in Africa is not quite as unusual as being blind in the West, there is less stigma. But even so, we did not think that was all we were about.” See Tim Adams, “Hearts of Gold,” The Observer, 12 October 2008; accessed at http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2008/oct/12/amadou.mariam.worldmusic.

⁷¹Kip Lornell, annotation, Goodbye, Babylon (Dust-to-Digital DTD-01, 2003), disc 2, p. 11.
musician’s blindness in order to sell records. In part, the Blake bio read: “Born in Jacksonville, in sunny Florida, he seemed to absorb some of the sunny atmosphere, disregarding the fact that nature had cruelly denied a vision of outer things. He could not see the things that others saw, but he had a better gift. A gift of an inner vision that allowed him to see things more beautiful. The pictures that he alone could see made him long to express them in some way, so he turned to music.”

For Jefferson’s bio, the label solicited pity from the opening lines: “Can any one imagine a fate more horrible than to find that one is blind? To realize that the beautiful things one hears about – one will never see? Such was the heart-rending fate of Lemon Jefferson, who was born blind and realized, as a small child, that life had withheld one glorious joy from him – sight.”

A similar strategy, one that played up the idea of second sight, was used when Dallas pianist/singer Arizona Dranes auditioned for OKeh in 1926. With her was a note written by a church elder that read, “Since She Is Deprived of Her Natural Sight, the Lord Has Given Her a Spiritual Sight That All Churches Enjoy.” The ploy worked for she went on to become a highly influential gospel musician for the label.

In his study of blues nicknames, David Evans found from his sample of 3,728 artists between 1920 and 1973 that, within a larger subcategory of nicknames indicating physical traits, male blues singers who had “blind” attached to their professional name amounted to 34, or 7.9%, of the recorded pool of 431 male figures with such

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73 Ibid., 3.
74 Ken Romanowski, Dick Spottswood, and Guido van Rijn, annotation, Goodbye, Babylon (Dust-to-Digital DTD-01, 2003), disc 1, p. 12.
nicknames.75 While this is not a significant statistic in and of itself, the lack of a larger collective pool of blind artists confirms the accepted belief that such bluesmen were often trailblazers on their instrument, a quality that extended to many of the above-mentioned names as well as other blind performers who weren’t saddled with a handicap sobriquet such as Sonny Terry and Willie Walker.

A number of blind men made names for themselves as well in the early days of country music including guitarist Riley Puckett, fiddlers Blind Alfred Reed and G. B. Grayson, guitar/mandolin duo Lester McFarland and Robert A. Gardner, David Miller (the Blind Soldier), and Andrew Jenkins (Blind “Andy”).76 Blind musicians such as Charlie Oaks, Dick Burnett, and J.W. Day were also active in country music as ballad/broadside pitchmen, following a trade, writes Bill Malone in his landmark book, Country Music, U.S.A., “that had been open to them [blind musicians] since the Middle Ages. . . . Anyone who visited a country fair, country court day, religious revival, or pubic hanging, or who traveled by railway in the days before World War I, was likely to see a lonesome blind fiddler or banjo player hawking songsheets or small pocket songbooks.”77

The music industry exaggerated blindness almost to the point of status, yet in assigning extraordinary feats to blind musicians, their talents were further marginalized


76Riley Puckett (1894-1946), in particular, was among the more notable guitarists in the early days of country music, a true innovator whose rapid lower-string runs and syncopated turns stood in sharp contrast to the usual guitar strumming provided behind fiddlers; see Tony Russell, Country Music Originals: The Legends and the Lost (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 36.

through an explanation that had less to do with ability than forces beyond their control.\footnote{Southall, \textit{Blind Tom: The Post-Civil War Enslavement of a Black Musical Genius}, 75.}
The reality was that many blind people were musicians for a reason: it was one of the few viable occupations to be had. Into the 1930s in America, the number of blind in many black communities compared to whites was five to one, the result of rampant syphilis among other factors.\footnote{Paul Oliver, \textit{Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues} (London: Cassell & Company, 1960; reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 249-50.} With little in the way of institutionalized opportunities and support for the blind musician in the African American South, playing street corner blues and/or gospel was less an option than the only alternative to outright begging. Before he went blind in his 20s from being shot in the face, Chicago-based, Texas-born bluesman Arvelia Gray, for example, had numerous jobs and employment opportunities, both legal and not so legal, from plantation, railroad, and circus work to restaurant help and mechanic to moonshining, gambling, drug selling and even robbery. After his blindness, however, he felt that becoming a street musician was his only option for financial gain.\footnote{Paul Oliver, \textit{Conversation with the Blues}, 2d ed. (London: Cassell, 1965; reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 146.}

Because this was the case, society was further tolerant to blind musicians who played a mix of secular and sacred music.\footnote{David Evans, \textit{The NPR Curious Listener’s Guide to Blues} (New York: Perigee, 2005), 31.} Willie McTell, for example, played blues and gospel material yet was given a moral pass by his then-wife’s father, a reverend. Recalled Kate (McTell) Seabrooks, “I, I sang spirituals, and I said, ‘I can’t sing the blues.’ And daddy, my daddy told me, he said, ‘God gave him that talent to make a living for hiself,’
he says, and, ‘Just like he gave everybody else a talent.’” Chicago-based, Mississippi-born bluesman Jim Brewer, who was almost totally blind from childhood, also confirmed to Paul Oliver that blind African American musicians of his generation were given leeway when playing blues and gospel (though Brewer himself claimed he was never “saved”). It has even been argued that blind street performers, by moving in and out of moral spheres, became intermediaries between secular and sacred musical traditions, a role that culminated, some might say, in African American culture with Ray Charles and his pioneering synthesis of blues and gospel into soul music.

During the decades blues was forming, blindness was a common enough disability, especially in rural America where medical help might be hard to come by and facilities might be few and/or under-equipped, and where diseases that beget blindness could more easily run unchecked. This was especially true for black populations, who experienced blindness at nearly twice the rate as whites. Perhaps it’s not surprising that a significant number of blind black performers gravitated toward the blues, where its characteristics – solo performance, itinerant lifestyle – more easily matched the survival strategies of said persons. Relying on one’s wits, after all, was essential to both the bluesman and blind person, and the uncertainties of life brought on by both race and

82Ruth Kate Seabrooks interview by Bernard West, Wrens, Georgia, 3 February 1979 (MSS 637 Box 21, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Georgia).

83Oliver, Conversation with the Blues, 179.


85The ratio of black-to-white populations for blindness in America in 1910 was 101.7 per 100,000 (black) v. 64 per 100,000 (white). Department of Commerce Bureau of the Census, Negro Population 1790-1915 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1918), 451.
affliction would have made the blues the ideal music to document such harsh realities. For the blind bluesman and street evangelist alike, life was fraught with potential danger and difficulty, with the performer never knowing whom he could trust and constantly being robbed, harassed, or run off by the police. One can see why it would create distrust and suspicion in someone like Reverend Davis, who notoriously carried (and used) a knife, or Greenville street evangelist Blind Joe Taggart, who was called “lowdown nasty mean” by onetime lead boy Josh White.

How Davis came to be blind is not altogether certain. In the various accounts he gave over the years, three details essentially stayed consistent: a) it happened as a newborn; b) something had been put in his eyes and made him go blind; and c) he learned of this mishap through his grandmother.

In his earliest known interview, he said that, according to his grandmother, he developed sore eyes at three weeks and that a doctor put something in them that caused ulcers to grow. This explanation – “medicines of Doctor who made a mistake” – was indeed provided by his grandmother for Davis’s application to blind school in 1914.

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86 Even into the 1970s, a poll found that while only ten percent of blind Anglo-American children considered music a career option, forty-one percent of blind African American children aspired to the profession. See Herbert H. Hyman, Janet Stokes, and Helen M. Strauss, “Occupational Aspirations Among the Totally Blind,” Social Forces 51, no. 4 (June 1973): 415.


88 Elijah Wald, Josh White: Society Blues (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 22. For a good portrait of the prewar Greenville blues and gospel scene dominated by blind players, see 11-25.

89 Reverend Gary Davis, interview by Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold, April/May 1951, TMs (photocopy), the Alan Lomax Archive, New York City, reel 1, side 1, p. 5.

90 Application kindly provided by the South Carolina School for the Deaf and the Blind, Spartanburg, South Carolina.
Consistent with that narrative as well, Davis said in a later interview that he became blind at three weeks from a doctor who put something “too strong” in his eyes, though in a separate interview. Davis said he became blind at a few months old from ulcers after a doctor used too strong a lotion.\(^91\) The story is plausible – Southern musical contemporary Riley Puckett (1894-1946), for example, apparently lost most of his sight as an infant when a doctor treated his eyes with a sugar of lead solution.\(^92\) An intriguing twist on Davis’s largely consistent accounts, however, comes from Lead Belly’s niece Tiny Robinson, who befriended Gary and Annie Davis upon their arrival in New York City in the 1940s. Robinson – who, as an African American woman and close family friend, had the kind of access to the Davises outside interviewers did not – tells a different tale: that Davis went blind after he developed an eye infection as a baby, and his mother, who couldn’t afford proper medicine, attempted to treat the condition with lye soap.\(^93\) Lending credence to this version, another member of Davis’s inner circle, a nephew, Joseph McClean, also said that Davis blamed his mother for his blindness.\(^94\)

In some ways, this remarkable claim by Robinson and McClean makes the most sense given the lack of medical attention, access, and affordability poor African American women in the South would have had when giving birth. The most common disease was ophthalmia neonatorum (better known as conjunctivitis or red eye), a


\(^93\)Tiny Robinson, interview by author, 1 August 2008, Brentwood, Tennessee, digital recording.

gonococcus infection passed from mother to newborn via the vaginal tract and requiring in Davis’s time a silver nitrate or protargol solution to halt infection. It was so prevalent into the 1880s that half the population in European schools for the blind was there because of conjunctivitis. Yet to cover up infant blindness caused by congenital syphilis or gonorrhea of the mother, it was common to rationalize the blindness as a “mistake” made a doctor or family member. Noted one turn-of-the-century author: “If the child’s eyes are lost from gonorrhoeal infection, no suit for malpractice will likely follow, for the reason that the microscopist’s evidence concerning the gonococcus would not sound well in court.”

Home delivery, often under less-than-sanitary conditions, was the norm throughout much of the South well into the mid-twentieth century; factor in poor postnatal care, crowded living conditions, and malnutrition, and the risk of blindness was but one of many health concerns which faced young children at the time, especially in impoverished and isolated communities. This was likely the case for Davis, who would have contracted conjunctivitis, as many babies did. Having no money to buy proper drops and/or uninformed, his mother would have tried whatever cleansing agent was available in the home, in this case, lye soap, an alkali that can actually scar eye tissue. Robinson’s version carries psychological repercussions as well since Davis grew up not only thinking that his mother abandoned him as a child at a time when he needed her most developmentally, but that she further caused his blindness.


96David Evans, correspondence with the author, 15 May 2010.

However, an eye exam given to Davis in July 1937 paints a somewhat different picture. The medical examiner wrote that Davis was blind from birth in both eyes and determined the primary cause to be “buphophtholmus” (sic, buphthalmos) caused by glaucoma with a secondary condition of ulceration of the cornea – his verdict: “hopelessly blind” with “no need for another examination.”

The diagnosis indicates a main cause of infant glaucoma, where fluid pressure builds up in the eyes within the first three months of life resulting in enlargement, or ox eye. Born with a congenital defect, therefore, Davis would have gone blind no matter what medical intervention he may have had. Two issues then converged, one immediate and one chronic. Davis developed an eye infection or enlargement (or both) at birth, which his mother or a doctor treated either properly or improperly. Regardless of either scenario, nothing was going to fix what was a preexisting condition for the infant – he was fated to go blind. Yet it’s easy to understand how his grandmother would have blamed her grandson’s blindness on the unsuccessful care he got, and more tragic still to think that Davis blamed a physician, or worse, his mother for something truly out of their control.

One drastically altered account comes from Alan Smithline, told to the former student by Davis: “When he was a little boy, it became apparent that there was some trouble with his eyesight – that there was some kind of condition, or some kind of problem. A doctor in town said that he could perform an operation to correct the problem,

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99 Evaluation of Davis’s eye exam by Dr. Thomas Gettlefinger, ophthalmologist, Germantown, Tennessee, digital tape, 4 February 2009.
but Gary said that there was no money to pay the doctor. Another doctor said that he would perform the operation for no fee, but unfortunately the doctor died. Left untreated, the condition steadily worsened until he totally lost his sight.\textsuperscript{100}

This version seems unlikely, however, given the series of coincidences that take place and what we know medically of Davis’s condition; also, as in other versions where a medical error is to blame, it stands to reason that Davis would have felt more comfortable talking to outsiders about this traumatic event by blaming a doctor rather than his mother. One thing is certain, however. Davis did not go blind as an adult, which Aaron Washington claimed happened in 1928.\textsuperscript{101} Rather, Washington undoubtedly confused Davis with Blind Boy Fuller, who went fully blind around that time.

Another aspect of Davis’s blindness that has led to confusion was his ability to discern with some degree shapes and shadows. Far from being sighted (which those who don’t understand blindness might be led to think), this trait only reinforces just how blind Davis was. It’s possible he had visual hallucinations, where the blind think they can see, something known as Charles Bonnet Syndrome.\textsuperscript{102} But it’s just as likely he could see with the slightest ability since only 1.3 percent of blind people live in total darkness.\textsuperscript{103}


\textsuperscript{101}Bastin, Red River Blues, 241.


Loss of vision or a reduced vision field can lead to levels of legal blindness beginning with 20/200 (recognition of only the large E on top of a Snellen eye chart).\(^\text{104}\) Next is what’s known as Count Fingers visual acuity (CF, from ten feet to one foot), followed by Hand Motion (HM), Light Perception (LP), and finally No Light Perception (NLP).\(^\text{105}\) Davis’s ability to pick out shapes or motion was noted by students/acquaintances such as Al Mattes, who said, “He definitely knew if someone was standing in front of him or even to know if someone were offering him something but his vision was not sufficient to allow him to discern what it was or even to be able to reach accurately and pick it up.”\(^\text{106}\) Davis himself told Stefan Grossman that “I could tell the look of a person but to tell who it is, I’m not able to do that.”\(^\text{107}\) Judging from the above comments and other similar observations, Davis’s blindness was in the vicinity of Hand Motion to Light Perception and therefore on the low end of the blindness spectrum. He didn’t live in total darkness but it was close.

Indeed, that is how Davis was described in his application to the South Carolina School for the Deaf and the Blind, as having “nearly total” blindness.\(^\text{108}\) In the form, filled out on 26 August 1914 and signed by his grandmother, the request is that he be admitted as a beneficiary pupil, “being able to pay no part of the necessary expenses.”


\(^{108}\) Transcript of Davis’s application provided by the South Carolina School for the Deaf and the Blind, Spartanburg, South Carolina.
At the time, the Cedar Spring blind and deaf school was the only such institution in South Carolina, having been founded in 1849 on 150 acres of land with a capacity of 100 students.\textsuperscript{109} In 1873, officers of the school resigned after black students were ordered admitted, which shuttered the institute for three years; only in 1883 were black students finally allowed on a segregated basis.\textsuperscript{110} During Davis’s stay, he was among a class of 231 students, up to then the largest population in the school’s history: 138 deaf, 92 blind, and one both with a racial breakdown of 173 white and 58 black.\textsuperscript{111}

Blind schools, which tended to be unified across the United States in terms of admission requirements, courses, and general planning, had only moved toward concerted training and care in the first years of the twentieth century – these were not asylums or homes for custodial care but boarding schools where students were allowed to remain as long as it was felt that help could be provided. Typically, such schools were open to all children who were residents of the institution’s state, who were at least five years old but not over 20, and whose vision was too defective to attend public school. The course of instruction was similar to that of public schools but with special emphasis on trade training: piano tuning; broom, basket, and mattress making; rag carpet and art fabric weaving; re-seating of chairs; and hand and machine sewing, crocheting, and


\textsuperscript{110}George Brown Tindall, South Carolina Negroes 1877-1900 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1952), 280-81.

knitting for girls. Full courses were also offered in musical education, usually vocal, piano, and organ training with orchestral and band instruments sometimes included.  

By the time Davis was admitted, the South Carolina School for the Deaf and the Blind had changed its classification from penal/charitable to educational, with four departments – literary, music, industrial, and physical – and instruction in such skills as basketry, knitting, and rug weaving for girls and chair and mattress making for boys. Davis appears to have studied, among other things, Braille (he learned New York Point), the Bible, and the organ. And he may have taught music at the school, which one welfare case file indicated (it’s likely Davis simply told his caseworker he taught at the school, though he might have gone back on a visit and done some “teaching”). He was also apparently trained in chair and mattress repair, which another welfare file claimed Davis knew.

He didn’t stay long at the school, however, and left in early 1915 because he didn’t like the food, according to an interview he gave to Bruce Bastin. It’s just as possible, however, that Davis simply could not or did not want to conform to the group expectations of blind school. As has been documented, when the congenitally blind


115 Case #7380, 13 December 1934, Spottswood Collection, Library of Congress.

116 Case #55, 9 May 1935, Spottswood Collection, Library of Congress.

encounter norms for independence, they adapt and become independent, but when they encounter dependent modes of behavior, they adapt in that direction.\textsuperscript{118} Perhaps, then, Davis left blind school because the high level of independence he had already acquired as a street performer made it difficult to engage in the stricter routines of school. Yet blind school, where he studied and possibly taught some music, seemed to have also been a turning point, a time in his life when he finally took his talent seriously. The implication is there, anyway, in the distinction he once made between being a guitarist pre-blind school and being a more learned musician post-education: “You see when I started playing guitar, after I went to school, I began to take up music. This was about 1915.”\textsuperscript{119}

Davis conformed to many of the physiological and psychological traits associated with blind people and in particular blind musicians, including possession of a strong independent streak and the desire to be self-sufficient, ease at getting around without a guide, remarkable levels of musical recall and improvisation, and use of a virtuosic skill as a way to succeed in the world despite having a handicap. Like a number of blind musicians, Davis—who played guitar, banjo, harmonica, and piano—was versed in several instruments. Riley Puckett, for example, knew how to play guitar, piano, banjo, mandolin, and violin;\textsuperscript{120} Blind Willie McTell played guitar, accordion, banjo, kazoo, harmonica, and possibly piano;\textsuperscript{121} and Stevie Wonder, a true multi-instrumentalist as an adult, had mastered harmonica, piano, drums, and organ by age 10.\textsuperscript{122}

\textsuperscript{118}Lukoff and Whiteman, \textit{The Social Sources of Adjustment to Blindness}, 252.


\textsuperscript{120}Cohen, “Riley Puckett: ‘King of the Hillbillies’,” 145.

\textsuperscript{121}David Evans, “Blind Willie McTell” in liner notes, \textit{Atlanta Blues: 1933} (JEMF-106, 1979), 22.
Davis also impressed witnesses with his tactile and aural sensitivity as a blind man. He could distinguish between one- and five-dollar bills by touch. He could tell how fast a car was going by sticking his harmonica out the window of the moving vehicle to hear the pitch the wind made in his instrument. Still, others claim Davis could tell colors by touch. Tiny Robinson remembered the time she bought a new car – one that Davis wanted to drive. He settled on touching it instead. “He said, ‘This is a gray car, isn’t it?’ she recalls. “And it was. I said, ‘Yes, Gary, why don’t you quit that mess about you can’t see.’ He could walk in this room and feel it and tell you the color. I never understood that. He never missed one color . . . [But] you could turn those eyes over and never know the back from the front of them.” Ernie Hawkins, who also spent a lot of time with Davis, recalls his supposed abilities differently, however: “He said he could see some, and he would put a guitar up to his face, and he could tell whether it was dark or light. But as I remember he wasn’t


124 Joan Fenton, interview by author, 16 July 2008, Davis & Elkins College, Elkins, West Virginia, digital recording. Blind Willie McTell and Blind Lemon Jefferson also displayed this ability; see, for example, Evans, liner notes, Atlanta Blues: 1933, 7; and Stephen Calt, liner notes, Blind Lemon Jefferson, King of the Country Blues (Yazoo 1069, 1990).


126 Tiny Robinson, interview by author, 1 August 2008. Blind Willie McTell also had such an ability according to one person who knew him; see Evans, liner notes, Atlanta Blues: 1933, 7.
right about that. He’d put a light guitar up to his face and say it was dark. I do remember him holding something up to his eyes and saying it was a color, which it wasn’t.”

Still, a number of feats normally associated with sight are not uncommon among the blind. Legally blind bluesman Sam Myers would go bowling and was known to throw strikes. Both Riley Puckett and Stevie Wonder could identify someone by their footsteps (Wonder calls them “foot notes”). Blind classical organist Alfred Hollins claimed he could distinguish depots when traveling by the sound they made as the train approached. Those who knew Blind Willie McTell recalled how he got around with great ease through a combination of tapping sounds with his cane and clicking sounds with his tongue. As Deacon James Pascal noted, McTell would routinely visit at night and do so by walking across a log that traversed a creek, moving “better than I could.” The ability to navigate without sight – which eighty-five percent of blind people possess to some degree – is, in fact, based on sound echoes, i.e., detecting surface echoes from close objects not unlike how bats and dolphins navigate.

To test

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128 Sam Myers and Jeff Horton, Sam Myers: The Blues Is My Story (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), xi.


130 Hollins, A Blind Musician Looks Back, 95.

131 Naomi Johnson, interview by David Fulmer, ca. 1991/92, Jaeckel Hotel, Statesboro, Georgia, tape recording (unpublished interview in possession of David Evans).

132 Deacon James Pascal, interview by David Fulmer, spring 1992, Jones Grove Baptist Church, Thomson, Georgia, tape recording (unpublished interview in possession of David Evans). A similar account was shared about Blind Lemon Jefferson’s ability to navigate at night; see Monge, “The Language of Blind Lemon Jefferson,” 41.

133 Bryant J. Cratty, Movement and Spatial Awareness in Blind Children and Youth (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1971), 172-73.
his own “facial vision,” in fact, blind musician Tom Sullivan once ran around an empty parking lot, avoiding all telephone poles as an experiment.\textsuperscript{134}

One aspect of Davis’s musicality, his extraordinary skill at improvising, finds partial explanation in what we know about blindness. In the nineteenth-century novel \textit{The Blind Musician}, Russian author Vladimir Korolenko describes such inclinations in his blind protagonist Petrik (and the profound musical nature of someone like Davis is not far from the author’s albeit romanticized summation): “Petrik loved music so ardently that he had studied it closely and methodically. But his rich musical imagination made it hard for him, when playing a set piece, to adhere strictly to the text. To everything which he played Petrik gave the stamp of his own genius.”\textsuperscript{135} What was once the realm of fiction, however, now has scientific backing, and in one study of music and the blind, an environment of “moment to moment expressivity”\textsuperscript{136} was documented, an improvisatory reaction to and expounding on repeated musical patterns, which led the to the conclusion that “congenital blindness may be a major contributory factor in such exceptionality.”\textsuperscript{137}

Yet on another level, the spontaneous approach in Davis’s playing was a necessary skill, a survival tactic that in part parallels a fundamental benchmark of music therapy, that music for the disabled becomes a crucial way of not only acting in but interpreting the world around them. The world of sound, in essence, takes over that of


\textsuperscript{137}Ibid., 151.
sight and dictates the parameters of an experience. And just as data from the world constantly shift and change for the blind, requiring new strategies and adaptations, so too does the music shift and adapt in ever constant gradations of expressivity.¹³⁸ In writing on the experiential difficulties of handicapped children, Paul Nordoff and Clive Robbins could well be describing the conditional state of the young blind Gary Davis. Music, observe the authors, “can lead or accompany the psyche through all conditions of inner experience, whether these be superficial and relatively commonplace or profound and deeply personal . . . Frequently the handicapped child is unable to assimilate life’s experiences; he may be confused because he fails to interpret them, he may even misinterpret them. He may have little or no faith in the capacities of his own psyche; he may live in a vortex of emotion, or conversely, his consciousness can be so remote that it is concerned only with distorted fragments of the realities of existence . . . For children such as these music may become a world of cogent, activating experience.”¹³⁹ Davis’s improvisational skills, then, came at once from black vernacular musical tradition and the culture of blindness, a merging of two worlds of “otherness” in his crafting of identity.

Furthermore, the notion that blind musicians are exceptionally inventive can be linked in part to the psychological state of blindness and the expanded role that the self must play in perception and experience.¹⁴⁰ The blind musician must rely on his or her own wits and instincts to arrive at a satisfactory solution to playing an instrument.

Information is not retrieved in the normal, mirror-projected fashion of the sight-reliant; as

¹³⁸Sam Myers even complained of having to play with sighted musicians who relied less on their ears than the written page; Myers and Horton, Sam Myers: The Blues Is My Story, 36-37.


¹⁴⁰Lowenfeld, “Psycho-Aesthetic Implications,” 2.
a result, one of the most common methods of learning an instrument, through visual imitation of a teacher or mentor, is not available and creative solutions must be found. In the best players, these solutions often become innovative, and the practitioners are seen as proactive leaders in their field. In the field of African American folk blues guitar, blind players could not learn the guitar via the most common method, imitation of other players; subsequently they had to arrive at more personalized solutions based on the sounds they wanted to achieve rather than the common patterns and fretboard shapes available to sighted guitarists.141

The above statement notwithstanding, it is a myth to say the blind are more musically creative than others. Scientific data has not borne out such a conclusion and it would be inaccurate to suggest that all blind children share this ability.142 The blind, however, tend to be more sensitive to sound, and as such may take to music with less of a handicap than in other areas of life;143 if anything, music can act as a great equalizer for the blind person trying to fit in and achieve something of an equal standing.144 By extension, blind musicians often have a way of impressing listeners with their level of


143 One important study is Herman A. Witkin, Judith Birnbaum, Salvatore Lomonaco, Suzanne Lehr, and Judith L. Herman, “Cognitive Patterning in Congenitally Totally Blind Children,” Child Development 39, no. 3 (September 1968): 767-786, which showed that blind children were at once inferior in analytic skills compared to sighted children but also vastly superior when it came to auditory abilities.

talent. This has as much to do with drive and determination as with innate sensitivity to sound and touch.

Scientifically, study after study has reinforced notions of extra-sensory abilities in the blind. Vision takes up a third of the human brain’s cortex, so when that sensation is denied or eliminated, other senses, especially hearing and touch, get reallocated to that part of the brain.\textsuperscript{145} This, of course, helps explain why sensory input such as the perception of sound and tactile sensitivity becomes heightened, even exaggerated, among the blind, and why the blind are often drawn toward music to begin with. As Robert Cantwell wrote in his discussion of bluegrass patriarch Bill Monroe, who had poor eyesight, the handicap of blindness can create its own special skill set for an otherwise deprived individual: “impaired vision is frequently accompanied by a concomitant auditory acuteness and is a condition which is likely to exclude the sufferer from ordinary occupations and open him to those which call upon his special strength.”\textsuperscript{146}

In one recent testing of blind musicians, more than half had the faculty of perfect pitch, a significant percentage higher than the twenty percent found in sighted musicians, and yet the blind’s propensity for perfect pitch was not related to the same factors such as early musical training that help give sighted people the ability. Instead, certain neural mechanisms seem responsible.\textsuperscript{147} Another recent study found that the blind are better at discerning direction of pitch as well as nuances of pitch on the temporal and spectral


levels, but only if the person had become blind at an early age. This proclivity could explain the abundance of blind piano tuners since the nineteenth century in Europe, part of an accepted shortlist of “blind trades” that also included chair caning, broommaking and basket weaving, as well as shopkeeping and peddling. Furthermore, a major study in 1973 using the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking found that the blind are more predisposed toward creativity than sighted people, concluding that, “It might be postulated that the blind child is more flexible on creative thinking activities because he has to be flexible and adaptable in order to learn to live in a sighted world. Since he cannot rely on visual sensory information he learns to be aware of information from other sensory channels . . . It is necessary for the blind child to rely on imagination and practice its use for his survival.”

Additionally, the blind show a heightened awareness of tactile sensations, another important if little discussed element in the playing of music. And like most blind persons, Davis showed a sensitivity to touch. He could tell the wood in a guitar by feel, and in front of one observer, identified an unknown guitar as a Martin, its fretboard as ebony, and, through tapping, its body as rosewood. According to one researcher who investigated sculpting by blind subjects, the “haptic type” of experiential person, such as

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149 Koestler, The Unseen Minority, 191. To this day there is an Association of Blind Piano Tuners in the U.K. See the association’s website at http://www.uk-piano.org.


someone lacking sight, “experiences his world mainly through his ego. Body experiences as muscular sensations, kinesthetic experiences, and touch are his main sources.”

Expanding on that notion is the thought that music is of extreme benefit to the blind since it provides “an integration of the aural, kinesthetic, and tactile senses – the only receptors available to the blind and therefore the essence of their existence.”

David Evans suggests that blindness and the subsequent acute abilities of hearing and touch accounted for a predominance of virtuosic prewar East Coast bluesmen, often considered some of the finest and most innovative in all of blues. Yet another explanation is that music training gets emphasized in schools for the blind more than in learning institutions for sighted children (two famous gospel singing groups, for example, formed out of their association with blind schools: the Five Blind Boys of Alabama at the Talladega Institute for the Deaf and Blind and the Blind Boys of Mississippi at the Piney Woods School for the Blind). That the blind musician, unemployable in conventional jobs, would have more time on his hands and therefore more time to practice is another possible explanation for being able to perfect his craft. Offering perhaps the most obvious answer, Clarksdale-born/Memphis-based blues harpist “Blind Mississippi” Morris

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Cummings says blind musicians are better than their sighted counterparts simply because they have fewer distractions. Says Cummings: “You’re more alert. You’re not distracted by seeing. It makes it easier for you, more comfortable. You could be sitting up there trying to learn to play an instrument and a pretty girl walk by and – bang! – you done forgot where you was. See, that wouldn’t bother us. We know the girl’s out there dancing but you can’t see the provocative movement. When they doing all the tootsie rolling and shaking their butts, you can’t see all that. All you can do is imagine.”  

In recounting her life story a century prior, famed blind hymnist Fanny Crosby (whose tune “Near the Cross” Davis sang) essentially offered the same insight, noting, “I could not have written thousands of hymns – many of which, if you will pardon me for repeating it, are sung all over the world – if I had been hindered by the distractions of seeing all the interesting and beautiful objects that would have been presented to my notice.”

Like other blind people, Davis was not without apprehension in his life. He had a fear of fire, for example, and would get agitated if he dropped a lit cigar out of his mouth. But those who knew him most remembered his profoundly independent streak. Like Blind Willie McTell – whose onetime wife recalled, “He didn’t go around begging. He wouldn’t take from nobody” – Davis rarely relied on a lead boy or outside help to get around. As Davis family friend James Robinson notes: “Automatically, when you see

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156 Morris Cummings, interview by author, 23 July 2007, Memphis, Tennessee, digital recording.

157 Fanny Crosby, Fanny Crosby’s Life-Story By Herself (New York: Every Where Publishing Co., 1905), 16.


159 Ruth Kate Seabrooks, interview by Bernard West, 3 February 1979.
a blind person, you want to help. But Gary did not want it, did not want it . . . I never seen a blind person so independent.”¹⁶⁰

One explanation can be found in what “help” sometimes represents to those on the receiving end. In the desire to help, an aiding person can actually demoralize those he or she helps, thrusting them into an unequal relationship that negotiates “independence” through the eyes of others.¹⁶¹ Indeed, by having to depend on others for things that contribute to a person’s physical identity – the selection of clothes, advice on posture and appearance – levels of mistrust can develop.¹⁶² Combine this with the normal element of mistrust that occurs in childhood for the blind – when random, uncalculated movement can cause not only injury but disruption in a healthy development of body image and the sense of one’s spatial relation to the world – and blind people would have good reason to be suspicious of all new experiences and people.¹⁶³ Sighted people, after all, set the rules of interaction, forcing the blind to make accommodations to the seeing world (such as turning one’s face toward a speaker).¹⁶⁴ Even facial expressions of the blind can be misread or unfairly judged by sighted people, such as one reviewer who criticized Davis’s concert demeanor as “facially expressionless” with “stern, unsmiling features.”¹⁶⁵ In addition, sighted people can more easily take advantage of the blind. As Sam Myers explained: “But one thing I never did like, when you had your own money to spend, you

¹⁶⁰James Robinson, interview by author, 1 August 2008, Brentwood, Tennessee, digital recording.

¹⁶¹Vaughan, The Struggle of Blind People for Self-Determination, 72.

¹⁶²Scott, The Making of Blind Men, 27.

¹⁶³Cratty, Movement and Spatial Awareness in Blind Children and Youth, 20.

¹⁶⁴Jenks, “Sighted, Blind, and In Between,” 129.

had to hide it away so nobody would know you had any . . . People was always watching you. If you was somewhere by yourself, they’d jackpot you and take everything you had. That’s what the city [Chicago] was known for. It was a harsh life to live.”

Davis made note of similar hardships being blind and having to play on the street, noting in one interview that, “I had guitars stolen off of me as fast as I could get them,” and in another that Harlem was where “I got most of my robbing done. Every time I sit down, it seem like somebody take something from me.” Davis was so suspicious, in fact, that he would take his guitar in the bathroom with him (where he would even play it). He could also pull out a knife, if prompted, as in the time in Durham when someone took a dollar tip out of his hand and was rewarded by being stabbed in the back and side, all to shouts by Davis of divine punishment. It’s no surprise then that, in the words of Tiny Robinson’s husband James, once Davis really got to know you and like you, “that a monumental thing.”

In talking with Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold in 1951, Davis revealed that his lack of trust and need for independence was tied up in the same issue: the motivations of sighted people, who were never what they seemed when interacting with the blind.

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166 Myers and Horton, Sam Myers: The Blues Is My Story, 52.


171 James Robinson, interview by author, 1 August 2008.
Only time I’d think about that [blindness], you understand, is when I’d be mistreated, you understand. Sometimes I’d be among company. They’ll claim they’re glad to have me in their company and knowing all the same time that they didn’t. The motions that they was making towards one another – I couldn’t see that. Yes, a many places a blind man would sit down and eat at, he don’t know whether the peoples have spit in the plate or eat out of it themselves or what. You just have to take their word. That’s the veriest things I thought about a man bein blind. . . . Don’t let nobody fool you: When you find a person takin up time with a blind person it ain’t because that they care so much about ’em; they figure that it might be a good deed that they might be able to do. An say a heap a times bout some of our people marryin blind people, you can’t hardly – [his voice is a deep sad sigh] I hate to say it, but it’s the fact – a blind person is – some peoples think that cause a man is blind he ought to git the wussest an the no-countest somebody for his help. Don’t nobody ever think tht a person like me, blind, ought to have the best of help. They think he ought to have the no-countest somebody in the world. Because he blind. I don’t know why they think that. I come in contact with all companies of people, Christian peoples and all. They think: This here blind person think that thing is all right, whether it’s all right or not. He never git the best thoughts about a thing. He never git the best advice about a thing. Never git the best answer bout it. I have the experience about it. It is a fact. . . . I’m speaking about the principle of people. They ain’t goin come up frank with him. 172

It’s no coincidence as well that blind blues players made more than passing reference to violence and gun imagery in their songs, from direct references such as Blind Boy Fuller’s “Pistol Snapper Blues” and “Big House Bound” with its opening stanza

I never will forget the day they transferred me to the county jail,
Lord, I never will forget the day, Lord, they transferred me to the county jail.
I had shot the woman I love, ain’t got no one to come go my bail. 173
to plenty of imbedded lines like “I got one eye on my pistol and the other on your trunk,”
from “Early Morning Blues” by Blind Blake (who also stated the warning in “Hard

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172 Reverend Gary Davis, interview by Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold, April/May 1951, TMs (photocopy), the Alan Lomax Archive, New York City, reel 1, side 2, pp. 6-7.

Pushing Papa”: “Never use a razor, pistol I do despise/Take one look at a man, he lay down and die”). In examining the lyrics of Blind Lemon Jefferson, Luigi Monge and David Evans concluded that such language displayed a “psychological need to give vent to his deepest feelings through violent imagery.” Gun allusions in particular might seem odd coming from a blind singer, but as a defensive measure, it makes perfect sense. Through lyrical bravura, the blind musician could deflect his perceived vulnerability and sound a warning to anyone who might mess with him, even when such references were veiled in humor or directed at the singer. As stated above, the potential to be victimized was real for any street musician, especially a blind one. “I may be blind,” such lines implied, “but don’t test me.” Davis, for being a man of the cloth, was no different. He had kept a gun on him since his days in Durham, where he purchased a pistol and permit for five dollars after having a guitar stolen from him. As he later recalled, “I ain’t got no sense if anybody botahs me. I carried a pistol all time I’se in North Car’lina. No, I didn’t ever shoot nobody. See I never did have to shoot nobody. Haven’t nobody ever bothered me, you see.” To another interviewer, he offered an even more pointed rationale: “You get people scared of you, that’s when you lose your life. If people ain’t scared of you, you understand, you’ll live a long time.”

174 Luigi Monge and David Evans, “New Songs of Blind Lemon Jefferson,” Journal of Texas Music History 3, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 25. Of course, violent imagery in the blues was ubiquitous regardless of disability – think the lyrical violence in the 1928 sessions of Mississippi John Hurt, an otherwise mild-mannered person according to those who knew him. Given the harsh reality of violence faced by African Americans, it stands to reason that blues – the starkest portrait of black life pre-rap – wouldn’t shy away from the theme. In the case of Jefferson, Davis, and other blind artists, the degree or percentage of such imagery makes it worth noting.

175 Harold interview, April/May 1951, reel XI, pp. 5-6.

176 3:03-3:13 into track 1 of digital copy, Reverend Gary Davis, interview by Larry Johnson and Lionel Rogosin, Jamaica, Queens, New York, winter 1971-1972, Joan Fenton Collection, FT-1339, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
Of Davis’s documented secular music, 34 of 94 tunes had lyrics in at least one recorded performance. Within that number, 19 (55.88%) contain violent imagery, and 15 (44%) of those mention guns or shooting. Examined another way, there are 165 mentions of overall violence in the 94 performances, resulting in an average of 1.75 per song, and of those mentions, 37 reference gun violence (use of a pistol, shotgun, rifle, .38, .44, plus the act of shooting), meaning that 39.36%, or more than one in every three secular performances sung by Davis incorporated gun imagery. These would be various renditions of “Cocaine Blues,” “Come Down to See Me Sometime,” “Cross and Evil Woman Blues,” “Delia,” “Don’t Let My Baby Catch You Here,” “Get Along Cindy,” “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary,” “Let’s Go Down to Betty’s,” “Little Boy, Little Boy, Who Made Your Britches?,” “Mountain Jack,” “Nobody Cares for Me,” “Sally, Where’d You Get Your Liquor From?,” “Spoonful,” “Talk on the Corner,” and “Tesse.” The tally increases when we include “Soldier’s Drill,” an instrumental, albeit one with frequent vocal and musical quips to “shoot him!” Taking that song into account, we then have 49 mentions of guns in 100 performances, or 49% of all secular music with spoken or sung material, a considerable amount for a singer, especially someone who couldn’t see. Other typical descriptions include the final line in “Cross and Evil Woman Blues” – “All she want is a shotgun or razor, ice pick, or piece of pistol she can find” – or the similar sentiment from “Don’t Let My Baby Catch You Here” – “She’ll cut you, shoot you, stab you through the heart, drink down your blood just like wine.” Davis also frequently mentioned guns to humorous effect. Indeed, his most boldly violent performances tended to be his funniest as well, with “Come Down to See Me Sometime” and “She Wouldn’t Say Quit” ironically containing the greatest concentration of violent imagery along with
“Spoonful.” (One oft-used idea involved at different times a .38, switchblade, or other such weapon (bed slat, included) by which a female would thwart Davis’s randy advances, as in the following stanza from “Come Down and See Me Sometime”: “I saw her comin’ down the street one day, and I decided to reach out and kiss her lips/Just as I got in hair’s reach of her, I got a .38 right in my hip.” (Variations on the theme show up as well in his lyrical “Get Along Cindy” and “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary.”)

The extreme opposite could also be found, however, with his most shocking mention of guns, found in one version of “Nobody Cares for Me” (discussed further below), where Davis spoke several asides in the context of suicide:

(Spoken: All the same time, he’s loading his pistol so he can kill himself, gonna blow his own brains out, you know. Said he feel like he had nothing to live for, you know.)

All I have is gone,
All I have is gone.
The girl I loved turned her back on me.
Now I’m here all alone.

(Spoken: Said, give it to me John. I’m gonna kill myself. Boom.)

In such examples, the imagery can be viewed as a type of fantasy or role-playing that would have addressed otherwise forbidden themes for blind and/or African American singers, a sublimation of anxieties and grievances through the ritual of song. Yet not so surprisingly, firearms were more than bluster for blind players who notoriously wielded them from time to time. Blind Willie McTell always had a .22 on his person, and had no

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problem flaunting it. Noted ex-wife Kate Seabrooks: “He was a mean man. Black Bottom [in Atlanta] was rough down on Bell Street, Black Bottom. You had to let ’em know who you were when you walked through there and when you went through there, ’cause if you didn’t they’d knock you out. Willie’d go through there with his pistol in his hand like he was the police.”179 Blind Lemon Jefferson reportedly carried a loaded gun on his person.180 Blind Boy Fuller, who was otherwise “good natured,” according to Davis, also carried a pistol and once shot his wife with a .32 when he caught her with another man, the apparent basis for the lyrics to “Big House Bound.”181 Bluesman Sam Myers affirmed that the blind are actually good with guns, able to shoot more accurately by hearing rather than seeing their targets.182 Willie Trice echoed similar thoughts when he said of Fuller, “If [he] got mad at you, you better stand still and not say a word.”183 Davis, who carried a .38 he called “Miss Ready,” summed up this ability with the statement, “If I can hear it, I can shoot it.”184

Like the aforementioned knife incident, Davis had no problem brandishing a gun when provoked, as in the time he paid a gun-toting visit to Boston’s Golden Vanity club,
which had paid him with a bad check.\textsuperscript{185} Ernie Hawkins recalled selling one of Davis’s shotguns in the late 1960s after New York had passed a stiff gun law. Davis asked Hawkins to get rid of the firearm in Connecticut, upon which Hawkins asked back, “‘Will they put me in jail?’ He said, ‘No, they won’t. You wont get caught.’ And so as a matter of faith – and my stupidity and naïveté – I did it. Sold it for fifty bucks.”\textsuperscript{186} There was also the time one Halloween when Davis bought a used two-tone cream-and-beige Ford while living in Jamaica, Queens. “So kids were out there playing on the car,” recalls Tiny Robinson. “And Gary got a gun [a .38] and went out there and told the kids if they didn’t get off the car he was gonna shoot ’em. He wasn’t going to shoot ’em but he scared them to death. The kids run home. And later on a policeman came and got Gary and told him, ‘We don’t want you to do that anymore, Reverend.’ I said, ‘Well, I didn’t even know he had a gun.’ I had to lie. I said, ‘I’ll take it away from him.’ And we took it away. And we didn’t know anything [but] he conned Jim [Tiny’s husband] out of the gun again.”\textsuperscript{187}

One remarkable incident involved the first meeting between Davis and John Lee Hooker. The occasion was a party at Dick Weissman’s apartment in Manhattan and Hooker arrived with Lawrence Cohn, who later wrote: “At one point Hooker grabbed Davis’s guitar and said to Gary, ‘Give me that guitar, old man. I’ll show you how to play.’ Gary wanted to rip Hooker’s throat out, partly because he knew Hooker wasn’t much of a player, and partly because nobody – Nobody! – ever had the effrontery to rip


\textsuperscript{186}Ernie Hawkins, interview by author, 8 August 2008.

\textsuperscript{187}Tiny Robinson, interview by author, 1 August 2008.
Gary’s guitar out of his hands, unless they intended to steal it. Hooker didn’t know that Davis often carried a pistol. It took us a while, but we calmed him down...

Not surprisingly, Davis had fierce self-determination, which was reinforced if not instilled in him while at blind school, where the goal was to “fit the students for life.” But such determination also helped counter the negative perceptions that can befall street musicians, blind or not. The attitude that playing on the street for change was just shy of begging must have provoked Davis to excel at his craft – no one was about to mistake him for a helpless mendicant seeking pity. Indeed, he knew all too well the stigma that surrounded busking, having been warned when he wanted to play a barbershop that “it would be necessary for him to stay within the barbershop rather than on the street for if he were to be on the street that would be begging and that it would be against the law.”

Yet life on the street, with its decided absence of conformity, reinforced in an almost exaggerated way the insistence on independence many blind have. Davis hinted as much when he said, “With street playing, you understand, you ain’t sure about a thing, and it keeps you on pins. What makes it cool and tricky is that you ain’t in a place to demand anything.”

In describing her own situation as a street performer, blind Washington D.C. guitar evangelist Flora Moulton commented that the decision to play on the street wasn’t thrust on her by forces out of her control but was instead a choice she willingly made. “When I first got out there, people would look on me just as maybe a beggar or

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188 Lawrence Cohn, liner notes to Gary Davis Style: The Legacy of Reverend Gary Davis (Inside Sounds ISC 0508, 2002), 1-2.


190 Case #282, July 30, 1942, Spottswood Collection, Library of Congress.

something like that. I didn’t ask nobody but they would kind of look at me. And different people would come along and say I didn’t have to do that. But see, they didn’t know my situation, because I always wanted to be independent.”

As with Moulton and other blind musicians, pity was not a part of Davis’s vocabulary. As Sam Myers explained, “From a child coming up, I learned one thing: if you want a strong something to happen to you in life, you gotta be strong. . . . I managed to survive a lot of times in places and in situations where it wouldn’t help if people had their perfect vision. I’ve learned to survive better than a lot of them, and it don’t look to me as if I’m as misfortunate as they are. I feel I am blessed and just as fortunate as a lot of people even when having a handicap. I look at it like self-pity is something that I don’t need, and it’s something that I don’t stick out in front of me.” Davis took that thought one step further, rationalizing his blindness as a gift from God: “Sometimes God has a way of fixin’ people so he can get a hand on you. . . . And sometimes you know when God takes a man’s sight He gives ’em something greater.”

Friends and acquaintances all recall that Davis never felt sorry for himself or complained about a situation he had long ago fully accepted. As Jorma Kaukonen observed, “He did what he had to do.” On that rare occasion when pity did show up in song, at least, it functioned as a cathartic act to keep such feelings in check, a reminder of

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193Myers and Horton, Sam Myers: The Blues Is My Story, 10.


his self-worth rather than a plea because of helplessness. While his Christian faith through word and music gave Davis assuredness in spite of his hardship, he was not above the occasional musical gesture that fielded a theatrical type of empathy. His countrified waltz “Nobody Cares for Me” – which hints at the vaudeville standard, “I Ain’t Got Nobody,” and the country number “Nobody’s Darling” – was performed only in informal settings such as parties where he could milk the pathos for all it was worth. The effect however was pure comedic theater, even when the specter of suicide loomed between stanzas, as in the above reference. Davis’s sobbing, moaning, and overall histrionic fits aimed for a chuckle rather than a tear, both from the listener and himself, as the following performances illustrate (the last example sung from the perspective of a woman in love with a “railroad man” until Davis breaks character and tears up over needing an alcoholic drink).

Nobody to come and kiss me goodnight,
Nobody to come and kiss me goodnight.
Ain’t nobody’s darlin’,
Nobody don’t care [feigns crying].

196 Credited to Will S. Hays, the nineteenth-century composer of country music milestone, “The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane,” “Nobody’s Darling” was recorded by numerous acts in the early years of country music as, variously, “Nobody’s Darling” (G. B. Grayson and Henry Whitter, Gennett 6304, 1927; Lester McFarland and Robert A. Gardner, Vocalion 5381, 1928; and the North Carolina Ridge Runners, Columbia 15650-D, 1928); “Nobody’s Darling on Earth” (Uncle Dave Macon and Sid Harkreader, Brunswick rejected, 1929; Raymond Render, Superior 2538, 1930; Clay Everhart and the North Carolina Cooper Boys, Columbia unissued, 1931; and Wade Mainer and Zeke Morris, Bluebird B-6460, 1936); “I Ain’t Nobody’s Darling” (Pipers Gap Ramblers, OKeh 45185, 1927); and “I’m Nobody’s Darling on Earth” (Kelly Harrell, Victor 20657, 1927). See Guthrie T. Meade, Jr., with Dick Spottswood and Douglas S. Meade, Country Music Sources: A Biblio-Discography of Commercially Recorded Traditional Music (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 262. “Nobody Cares for Me” as performed by Davis is not the Mississippi John Hurt song of the same name, found on Last Sessions (recorded 1966 and reissued on The Complete Studio Recordings, Vanguard Records 181/83-2, 2000), though the two waltz-cast tunes seem to share a common ancestor. Charlie Poole’s “The Only Girl I Love” is also a possible relative. Recycled lines from Davis’s version also find their way into “Delia” and “People That Use to See, Can’t See No More” [sic].

197 Reverend Gary Davis, “Nobody Cares for Me,” private recording by Ernie Hawkins, ca. 1968/70; tape 8, side B in Appendix 12.
or this one

[feigns crying]
All I have is gone,
All I have is gone.
The girl I loved turned her back on me,
Now I’m here all alone.¹⁹⁸

or this one

I’m a poor child in this world,
I’m a poor child in this world.
Ain’t nobody’s darlin’,
Nobody don’t care for me.
(Spoken: Please bring me a drink [feigns crying].)²⁰⁹

Given the many blind players in prewar blues and gospel, very little commentary on blindness can be found in the way of song. Several well-known songs addressed blindness, of course, notably “Blind Barnabas” and “The Blind Man Stood on the Road and Cried,” which was especially popular in rural black churches in south and east Texas, as reported by John A. and Alan Lomax,²⁰⁰ though Josh White recalled that the blind Piedmont singers he led around performed it.²⁰¹ Still, among the majority of Southern traditional musicians who suffered blindness, very little direct reference to or reflection on the condition exists in their songs.


²⁰⁰John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, American Ballads & Folk Songs (New York: Macmillan, 1934), 596. The Lomaxes identify the song as “Blin’ Man Stood on de Way an’ Cried.”

Among the very few musical examples from a blind performer, “I Must Be Blind, I Cannot See” by New Orleans one-man-band Blind Roger Hays is a true standout. Recorded in 1928 for Brunswick, the harmonica-and-guitar-accompanied tune was not, as the title suggests, a version of “When the Train Comes Along” (which contains a similar line) but a song laid out in repeated-line couplets that waver back and forth from third to first person, proffering both detached empathy and personal solicitation. Couplets three and four notably juxtapose the singer’s condition through a harrowing description of blinded eyes (“His eyes is green, they’s awful white”), followed by a metaphorical stroll in God’s light that intimates both second sight as well as the ability to see again in Heaven. In pairing the white pale of blindness with the light of the spiritually-sighted (the latter couplet a likely paraphrase of the refrain, “We walk in the light, beautiful light,” from the hymn “Jesus, the Light of the World”), Hays assembled one of the most visually-contrastive couplets in all of African American song.

“I Must Be Blind, I Cannot See”

I must be blind, I cannot see, I never will see no more;
I must be blind, I cannot see, I never will see no more.

He casts his eyes up in the sky, never will see no more;
He casts his eyes up in the sky, he never will see no more.

His eyes is green, they’s awful white, never will see no more;

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202 Little in the way of songs about blindness existed in the post-war period as well, Sleepy John Estes’s 1947 recording of “Stone Blind Blues” being a notable exception. From sighted players, examples include the Muddy Waters number, “Blind Man Blues,” and Little Milton’s “Blind Man.” Mostly the blues treated blindness as either a metaphor for cuckoldry, as in the Virginia Liston number “You Thought I Was Blind But Now I See,” and Sonny Terry’s “I Woke Up This Morning and I Could Hardly See,” or as a way to suggest sexual double entendre as in the urban blues standard “Eyesight to the Blind.”

His eyes is green, they’s awful white, I never will see no more.

I’m walking in the light, I’m walking in the light;
I’m walking in the light, the beautiful light, beautiful light of God.

Now I must be blind, I cannot see, never will see no more;
I never will see no more in this world, I never will see no more.\(^{204}\)

The other example from the prewar era was Davis’s recording of “Lord, I Wish I Could See” (a.k.a., “There Was a Time When I Was Blind”). Noted for its rather singular place in prewar black song, it exists in at least three recorded versions spread over Davis’s professional musical life: 1935 (in what was the only unissued song from his ARC sessions), 1956, and 1971. Davis claimed he wrote the song in 1911, and its power derives from the painful personalization he offers, a tale of misery where the second sight of spiritual awakening is hardly a consolation. “It’s speaking about what happened in my life,” Davis said of the tune to Stefan Grossman. “How people put me aside.”\(^{205}\) In the 1935 version, he sings over the course of twelve stanzas about the isolation, physically and metaphysically, with which he had to contend – “Since I lost my sight, I lost my friends/Lordy, nobody’s a friend to me.” To that end, key words act as lyrical motifs on the idea of loneliness, abandonment by friends, and adversity, an intonation of suffering in which stanzaic downbeats land on key words such as “cried,” “wished,” “hard,” “turned,” and “nobody.” Davis, however, halts the self-pity with spoken passages near the end that serve as something of a moral: “You all ought to realize that you got your good sight. You ought to know that it’s a good thing to have. You can see! It’s true. You

\(^{204}\) Blind Roger Hays, “I Must Be Blind, I Cannot See” (Brunswick 7047, 1928); on Sinners and Saints (1926-1931) (Document Records DOCD-5106, 1994).

\(^{205}\) Grossman, Rev. Gary Davis/Blues Guitar, 9.
can see. I mean, you can see, you can see everything coming to you!’” Surely, ARC’s unwillingness to issue the song – which became commercially available only in the 1990s\(^{206}\) – was not due to the performance, one of Davis’s most powerful and moving from the sessions. Instead, it’s worth speculating that the song’s acute sense of grief and abject misery – neither masked in religious nor sentimental metaphor – would have been too uncomfortably intense for the average record buyer.\(^{207}\)

“Lord, I Wish I Could See”\(^{208}\)

[Guitar intro]

It was a time when I went blind,
It was a time when I went blind,
Was the darkest day that I ever saw,
Was a time when I went blind.

Lord, I cried the whole night long,
Lord, I cried the whole night long,
Cried, “Oh, Lord, won’t you tell me how long?
Am I to be blind always?”

Lord, I wished I could see again,
I wished I could see again,
If I could see, how happy I would be,
I wished I could see again.

Lordy, nobody knows like me
At the trouble I do see,
I’m away in the dark, got to feel my way,
Lordy, nobody cares for me.


\(^{207}\)Davis authority Robert Tilling feels that the song’s sense of self-pity was a factor in its non-release; see Robert Tilling, “I Never Was Shy Around None of Them Guitar Players,” *Blues & Rhythm* 69 (May 1992): 7.

Lord, it’s hard I have to be blind,
Lord, it’s hard I have to be blind,
I’m away in the dark and I have to believe,
Lord, it’s hard I have to be blind.

Lordy, nobody knows like me,
Lordy, nobody knows like me,
Since I lost my sight, I lost my friends,
Lordy, nobody’s a friend to me.

My friends turned their back on me,
My friends turned their back on me,
’Cause I’m away in the dark and I cannot see,
Yeah, they turned their back on me.

Lordy, nobody cares for me,
Lordy, nobody cares for me,
’Cause I’m away in the dark and I cannot see,
Lordy, nobody cares for me.

Lord, my way seems so hard,
Lord, I’m blind,
Said I’m away in the dark, got to feel my way,
Lordy, my way seems so hard.

It was a time when I went blind,
Was a time when I went blind,
Was a dreadful day that I ever seen,
Was a time when I went blind.

Lordy, nobody knows like me
At the trouble I do see.
(Spoken: You all ought to realize that you got your good sight.
You ought to know that it’s a good thing to have.
You can see! It’s true.
You can see, I mean you can see,
You can see everything coming to you!)
It was a time when I went blind.

Taken literally, the lyrics would suggest that Davis was able to see at one point in
his life, which in all probability was not the case. It’s also possible he didn’t write the
song as he claimed but picked it up from another player. Davis was forthcoming,
however, when he learned songs from outside influences, so there’s no reason to doubt his claim of authorship here, and how he plays the song instrumentally is certainly consistent with other numbers of his in a C shape. Terry Rowden, in his recent book on blind African American musicians, The Songs of Blind Folk, argues that the song, which he feels came close to “collapsing into complete monological self-absorption,” existed in Davis’s street repertoire as a way to proffer from passersby both pity and money – a delicate balance in how he chose to present himself, at once talented and yet in need of financial assistance.²⁰⁹ Coming from a culture where commitment to mainstream values was not deep to begin with, the blind in such cases were sometimes far from helpless. Rather, it has been argued, they were among the most autonomous of their kind, rejecting the patronizing air that often accompanied help through more traditional means, and in playing up dependency on the street, actually attained a type of independence.²¹⁰ So while Rowden’s observation may hold some truth, it nevertheless ignores the larger issues of self-worth and inner resolve that Davis explored through this particular song, something he explained when he introduced it in a 1964 concert at UCLA (Rowden also quoted from the same concert but overlooked the fuller explanation in his analysis):

Now I want to sing you a song that people are always after me to sing. I hardly ever sing it, but I hardly ever think to sing about my condition either. I used to keep my head down all the time. When did anyone care a thing about a blind man? But something raised my head up one day, and I can be just as much as anybody. I don’t care if I was blind. I had a woman ask me one time, you see, “Reckon you’ll ever marry?” Another said, “Oh no, what would he do with a woman, him blind and can’t see? She’ll have to take care of him. I wouldn’t want


that responsibility.” I cried over that many times. I want you all to hear me, please listen to me, I cried over that. This song come to me and I sing about it.”

It’s a very telling statement and alters how we interpret the lyric content of the song. For starters, Davis said he didn’t think to ever play it, which makes sense. He had spent a lifetime countering the negative connotations of his blindness through various acts of self-sufficiency and musical acumen, so why reduce himself to the role of victim again in song? Also, his blindness was something he couldn’t change, and the song, had he performed it often, would have suggested he had not found peace with his disability. But there’s another way to look at it. The key word of the entire song, after all, is “was,” which, I argue, doesn’t place the cause of his blindness in past tense so much as the control which blindness had over him in past tense. As he said above in reaction to the taunts of two women, “Something raised my head up one day, and I can be just as much as anybody. I don’t care if I was blind.” This song, then, acted not to elicit pity from the audience, but to remind Davis that his days of self-pity were behind him. “There was a time when I went blind,” implied then that his blindness no longer defined who he was. Instead, this powerful number affirmed for Davis that he had in fact overcome the most difficult hurdle of his condition, the stigma attached to it by a sighted world.

While the above song was Davis’s most notable concerning the lyrical trope of blindness, it wasn’t the only time he referenced his condition in song. He paraphrased the spiritual “The Blind Man Stood on the Road and Cried” in “Won’t You Hush,” uttering the line, “Blind man sitting by the wayside, begging for his sight/Oh my Lord, oh my

211Tilling, ‘Oh, What a Beautiful City’, 76.
Lord, what shall I do, what shall I do?” Blindness is addressed directly as well in the spiritual, “When the Train Comes Along” (a.k.a., “I’m Gonna Meet You at the Station”): “Lord, I may be blind and I cannot see/I’m gonna meet you at the station when the train, when the train, train come along.” Yet other song choices such as “You May Buke and Talk About Me,” “I Cannot Bear My Burden By Myself,” “Lost Boy in the Wilderness,” and “I’ll Be All Right Some Day” intimated his condition and its associated hardships in more general terms.

One song in particular, “Moon Is Going Down,” can be thought of as a grand metaphor for blindness. Unlike “Sun Is Going Down,” which can also function symbolically for lost sight (though I contend elsewhere that its main power comes as veiled commentary on lynching), “Moon” concerns itself with loss at once personal and archetypal, equating physical with spiritual darkness.

Well, ain’t a-that moon goin’ down to vanish away, oh Lord, And the sun refuse to shine, oh Lord, And every star shall be disappear, And the moon goin’ down and vanish away.

Another song that showed up in his set lists from the 1960s was “People That Use to See, Can’t See No More”[sic]. This traditional religious number has something of a

212 Reverend Gary Davis, Demons and Angels.
South Carolina pedigree. Two artists who recorded it hailed from the city of Columbia: the Silvertone Jubilee Quartette as “People I Used to See (Vocalion 1938, unissued); and gospel singer Madame Edna Gallmon Cooke (1917-1967) as “I Can’t See Them Now” (Nashboro 623, 1958). In the latter version, Cooke turned the refrain “The people that I used to see, my Lord, I can’t see them now” into a lament about loved ones who have died. Another performance documented in Maryland in 1985 by the Eastern and Western Shore Praying and Singing Bands built on that theme as well, adding cautionary end-times imagery.\textsuperscript{216} Davis’s rendition, with seeming adaptation as well of “Now Is a Needy Time,” veered in a different direction, acting as a first-person plea for God to eliminate his suffering.

The title line – “People I used to could see, I can’t see ’em now” – appeared in his 1935 recording of “The Great Change in Me” in what essentially followed a variant of that song documented in 1925 by Newman Ivey White from song informant Ed Lloyd of Creedmoor, North Carolina:

\begin{verbatim}

Been a great change since I been born. (x 4)

The things I used to do, I don’t do now. (x4)

Places I used to go I don’t go there now. (x3)

Oh the people I used to see, I don’t see ’em now. (x3)\textsuperscript{217}

\end{verbatim}


Recording a decade later, Davis sang the following (including the use of the “great change” stanza as a chorus, as indicated by White in his collecting of the tune):

“The Great Change in Me”

The great change, yes Lord, since I been born,
Great change since I been born,
It’s a great change, Lord, since I been born,
It’s a great change since I been born.

People that I used to could see, I don’t see ’em no more,
People that I used to could see, I don’t see ’em, no more,
People that I used to could see, I don’t see ’em, no more,
Don’t you know it’s a great change since I been born.

There’s a great change, yes Lord, since I been born,
Great change since I been born,
Great change since I been born,
Lord, it’s a great change since I been born.

Things that I used to would do, I don’t do ’em no more,
Things that I used to would do, I don’t do no more,
Things that I used to would do, Lord, I don’t do no more,
Don’t you know it’s a great change since I been born.

It’s a great change since I been born,
Great change since I been born,
Great change, Lord, since I been born,
Yeah, great change.

It’s a great change since I been born,
Great change since I been born,
Great change since I been born,
Don’t you now it’s a great change since I been born.

Things that I used to would love, I don’t love ’em no more,
Things that I used to would love, I don’t love ’em no more,
Things that I used to would love, Lord, I don’t love ’em no more,
Don’t you know it’s a great change since I been born.

Great change since I been born,
Great change since I been born,

Great change, Lord, since I been born,
Don’t you know it’s a great change since I been born.

Said the people that I used to would hate, Lord, I don’t hate ’em no more,
People that I used to would hate, I don’t hate ’em no more,
People that I used to would hate, I don’t hate ’em no more,
Don’t you know it’s a great change since I been born.

Great change since I been born,
Great change since I been born,
Great change, Lord, since I been born,
Great change since I been born.

In the context of the above song, the implication of the line, “People that I used to could see, I don’t see ’em no more,” was that a born-again Davis had turned his back on old, sinful ways and therefore the people that he used to associate with, “I don’t see ’em no more.” Indeed, that was how Davis used the phrase in the context of a sermon he later gave: “People that I used to would hate, and the things that I used to would love, the paths that I used to be walking, I changed my path when I got it. Then I changed my conversation when I got it.”219

However, in “People That Use to See, Can’t See No More,” the sentiment becomes the refrain in a fourteen-stanza petition beseeching God to hear the singer’s pitched cries and moans. Davis, like many African Americans, found strength in adversity through his Christian faith and the implication in the song below is not that listeners should take pity on Davis but that God ultimately took pity on him, a poor, disabled person whose life as minister and successful musician was proof of heavenly intercession. Played on guitar in the key of C, its eight-bar pattern is very much like “Cocaine Blues” down to the reverse bass, and how Davis handled the musical

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219 17:17-17:32 of “Sermon,” At Home and Church.
accompaniment draws comparisons to how Robert Wilkins overlaid sacred and secular lyrics onto the same musical bedrock in “That’s No Way to Get Along” and “Prodigal Son.” The words are what create disparate songs, dictating in this case different melodies and, ultimately, different listening experiences.

“People That Use to See, Can’t See No More”

[Guitar intro]

Well, Lord, won’t you come by here?
Lord won’t you come by here?
People that I used to could see, my Lord,
I can’t see ’em now.

Lord, it’s a prayin’ time.
Lord, it’s a prayin’ time.
People that I used to could see, my Lord,
I can’t see ’em now.

Lord, won’t you hear my prayer?
Lord, won’t you hear my prayer?
People that I used to could see, my Lord,
I can’t see ’em now.

Lord, it’s a tryin’ time.
Lord, it’s a tryin’ time.
People that I used to could see, my Lord,
I can’t see ’em now.

Lord, what’s the matter now?
Lord, what’s the matter now?
People that I used to could see, my Lord,
I can’t see ’em now.

Oh, won’t you hear my moan?
Oh, Lord, won’t you hear my moan?
People that I used to could see, my Lord,
I can’t see ’em now.

Lord, won’t you hear my cry?
Lord, won’t you hear my cry?
People that I used to could see, my Lord,
I can’t see ’em now.

Oh, what’s the matter now?
Oh –
People that I used to could see, my Lord,
I can’t see ’em now.

Lord, I’m on my bended knee.
Lord, I’m on bended knee.
People that I used to could see, my Lord,
Can’t see ’em now.

Lord, I’m in trouble now.
Lord, I’m in trouble now.
People that I used to could see, my Lord,
Can’t see ’em now.

Lord, I need you now.
Lord, I need you now.
People that I used to could see, my Lord,
I can’t see ’em now.

Lord, won’t you hear my prayer?
Lord, won’t you hear my prayer?
People that I used to could see, my Lord,
I can’t see ’em now.

[Guitar break]

Lord, I need you now.
Lord, I need you now.
People that I used to could see, my Lord,
I can’t see ’em now.

Oh, it’s a tryin’ time.
Lord, it’s a tryin’ time.
People that I used to could see, my Lord,
I can’t see ’em now.

Not all of Davis’s references to blindness were literal, though the richness of such metaphoric content only multiplied when sung by a blind musician. The dichotomous
relationship between light and darkness in the Bible only invited further analogy between
sight and blindness. There is popular Christian sentiment that one can be blinded by sin,
for example, as in the hymns, “Lord, I Was Blind, I Could Not See,” “God’s Way Is
Best” with its line, “Had I the choosing of my pathway, in blindness I should go astray,”
and, most famous of all, “Amazing Grace” with its line, “Was blind, but now I see.” 221
Davis himself sang that song and its oft-repeated line on at least one documented
occasion, a church service from the 1960s in which he led a congregation in a medley of
“Amazing Grace” with the spiritual “I Will Trust in the Lord,” 222 and he used similar
language elsewhere, notably in his own gospel composition, “Oh Glory, How Happy I
Am,” which contained the couplet, “I was out in darkness and I could not see/Jesus came
and he rescued me.” Tied to such imagery, of course, is the concept of spiritual sight,
where conversion leads to a new way of “seeing” or understanding the world and oneself,
as in the line from John 8:12 (KJV), “Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the
light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light
of life” (this, too, was mirrored by Davis in “I Saw the Light,” for example).

But we shouldn’t discount the possibility that other mentions of sight in Davis’s
songs had very real implications for the musician. Healing the blind, after all, was a chief

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221 “Lord, I Was Blind, I Could Not See” (words by William T. Matson, 1868) in Baptist Hymnary
Committee of Canada, ed., The Hymnary for Use in Baptist Churches (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1936),
#337; “God’s Way Is Best” (words by Chares W. Naylor, 1904) in B. E. Warren, A. L Byers, and Clara M.
Trumpet Publishing Co., 1911), #120.

222 See track one, disc three of Rev. Gary Davis, At Home and Church: 1962-1967 (Stefan
Grossman’s Guitar Workshop 130/1/2, 2010).
preoccupation of Jesus the miracle worker.\textsuperscript{223} Indeed, a sub-theme emerges in several songs that Davis believed his sight would be returned to him in heaven. In “The Angel’s Message to Me,” Davis sang: “I’m goin’ home to see my Jesus, I’m goin’ home to see my Lord/I’m goin’ home to see my Jesus, there’s a mansion up there for me,” and while the verb “see” certainly functions for the more general “meet” in the above lines, don’t discount that Davis fully expected to “see” his Lord on that day. One of the chief rewards of heaven, after all, is being able to see the Savior, as in Lucie Campbell’s hymn, “Just to Behold His Face,” and how much more would such a promise have resonated with a blind Christian. This observation extends beyond Davis to other blind singers who favored a similar line in “By and bye I’m going to see the King,” found in performances by Blind Willie Johnson (“Bye and Bye I’m Going to See the King”), Arizona Dranes (“Bye and Bye We’re Going to See the King”), and Blind Mamie Forehand (“Wouldn’t Mind Dying If Dying Was All”). Not surprisingly, Davis also employed the line in “Soon My Work Will All Be Done,” which is the likely candidate in an unissued track from the Harlem Street Singer sessions identified as “By and By I’m Going to See the King.”\textsuperscript{224}

Among other such references in Davis’s oeuvre were the central line in “Twelve Gates to the City” – “Oh, what a beautiful city” – which implied that Davis would be able to behold the millennial vision of the new Jerusalem as prophesied in Rev. 21; and a


\textsuperscript{224}Plenty of variants by sighted musicians exist as well, of course, including “I Wouldn’t Mind Dying (But I Gotta Go By Myself)” by both Rev. I. B. Ware and the Golden Leaf Quartet, “I Wouldn’t Mind Dying If Dying Was All” by both Smith Casey and the Norfolk Jubilee Quartette, and “By and By We Goin’ to See the King” by Sampson Pittman.
hymn that Davis taught to Ernie Hawkins, “There Will Be Stars in My Crown,” with a wealth of visual imagery topped by an opening line resonant to any blind believer:

Oh what a joy it will be when his face I behold,
Living gems at his feet to lay down;
It would sweeten my bliss in the City of Gold,
Should there be any stars in my crown.  

A less obvious number contains perhaps the most persuasive argument that Davis believed in a Biblical promise that he would one day see. The Davis standard, “I Am the Light of the World,” took its refrain – “Just as long as I’m in this world, I am the light of this world” – from John 9:5 (KJV): “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” The context of that passage, however, makes the song (and particular saying by Jesus) an intriguing choice for Davis, for the chapter concerns Jesus healing a blind beggar and subsequent inquiry of the miracle by the Pharisees. In John’s account (the longest New Testament narrative about healing the blind), Jesus passes by a man blind from birth. His disciples ask whose sin caused the man’s blindness, his parents or his own. Jesus answers that it is nobody’s fault and proceeds to heal the man by applying mud to his eyes after stating that He is the light of the world. And the correlations to Davis’s life – blind essentially from birth through no fault of his own – couldn’t be more apparent. Casting blame for the blindness was not the issue in this particular scripture; rather, blindness becomes the opportunity for God to do His work.  

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225 “Will There Be Any Stars?” (E.E. Hewitt and John R. Sweeny, 1897) in Date, ed., Pentecostal Hymns Number Three, 4.

had worked miracles on others, so too had he worked a miracle on Davis, who – even without the desire that his sight would be restored in heaven – was granted on earth both spiritual sight and a spiritually-nurtured talent, as presented in two of the song’s key stanzas:

Oh, you don’t believe in Jesus,  
And not a word he said.  
When he come all the way down to Lazarus’ grave,  
And raised him from the dead.

Oh, I got fiery fingers,  
I got fiery hands.  
And when I get up in heaven,  
I’m gonna join that fiery band.²²⁷

That a blind musician would entertain the idea he or she would see again in heaven is not farfetched or illogical for someone of faith. When speaking to crowds, Fanny Crosby, for example, would relish being blind since it meant the first face she would ever see was that of Jesus in heaven, a sentiment mirrored in the refrain of her hymn “Saved by Grace”: “And I shall see Him face to face/And tell the story – saved by Grace.”²²⁸

Beyond the idea of sight itself, Davis’s music contains a significant number of visual references. Blind people, in general, show a paradoxical increase in visual imagery as well as intersensory connections and synesthesia (the intermingling of sensory data, such as equating colors with certain musical chords or keys).²²⁹ A near-synesthetic


²²⁹Sacks, Musicophilia, 194.
example was found in the introduction Davis gave to his composition, “Soon My Work Will All Be Done,” which he said came to him in a dream and which blends sensory data into one remarkable vision.

I was in a green field as pretty and green as it could be. And everybody I looked at was dressed in white walking over that green field, little short stubs of grass, you understand, the ground just as level as it could be. . . . I got up on a great big ol’ platform. And a great long white train was on that platform. Everybody was on that platform was dressed in white . . . wasn’t but a few got a chance to get on that train. I got on, but the loads of them was out on that platform didn’t get a chance to get on that train. When the train pulled off that’s when they started to singing that song, “Soon my work will all be done, I’m going home to live with my Lord.” I woke up, washed my bed with my tears. I didn’t know what I was crying about. That song stayed with me, I couldn’t get rid of it.230

Italian blues scholar Luigi Monge has explored blindness in several groundbreaking articles that dissect prewar blues and gospel lyrics through the lens of the disability. In “The Language of Blind Lemon Jefferson: The Covert Theme of Blindness,” Monge found that Jefferson led all other blind African American blues and gospel performers in the prewar era of recordings with 241 direct or indirect visual references in his 97 extant recordings.231 Not only do we come away with renewed appreciation for Jefferson’s lyrics – which show a surprising level of thematic coherence and logic as the result of such analysis – their copious visual data acted, argues the author, to counter the situation of blindness. Writes Monge: “Jefferson’s psychological need to visualize must have been so uncontrollable that it was compensated for in his

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waking life by a profusion of visual references, which – albeit covert – function as a sort of dream surrogate.”

In a follow-up work, “Blindness Blues: Visual References in the Lyrics of Blind Prewar Blues and Gospel Musicians,” Monge studied 522 sung (i.e., non-instrumental) songs by twenty-one prewar blues and gospel performers, noting the number of visual references imbedded in their recorded repertoires. These references include both overt mentions of blindness, which are relatively few, and what he calls “submerged,” or more covert mentions. The latter allusions imply activities of sight, color recognition, reading and writing, and “context of situation” where a line is given ironic or added meaning once the blindness of the singer/protagonist is taken into account.

Monge concludes that blind blues and gospel singers treated their affliction differently in song. When mentioned, blindness was addressed more overtly by gospel artists who referenced their misfortune for proselytizing purposes as “massive statements of God’s healing power” and/or to channel a “personalized dialog with God;” blues artists, on the other hand, treated the condition through more covert language since the affliction was “not a matter of open discussion” and so was dealt with “unconsciously in their texts.”

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232 Ibid., 55.


234 Paul Oliver offers one seemingly obvious example of a blues making reference to a performer’s disability in “Pistol Slapper Blues,” in which Blind Boy Fuller sings: “I can tell my dog anywhere I hear him bark/I can tell my rider if I feel her in the dark”; see Oliver, Blues Fell This Morning, 250. David Evans notes however that sighted blues singers such as Charley Patton also sang this lyric.

235 Monge, “Blindness Blues,” 98, 111-12. Paul Oliver comes to a similar conclusion absent the rigorous analysis of Monge, noting that the evangelical music of blind performers – such as “I Must Be Blind, I Cannot See” by Blind Roger Hays and “Pure Religion” as recorded by Blind Gussie Nesbit – was often more open about the singer’s disabling condition as a way to address and even emphasize the spiritual
In his book *The Songs of Blind Folk*, author Terry Rowden questions the inclusive nature of Monge’s criteria, noting that in the latter’s desire to document verbalism, such commonly spoken phrases as “don’t look for me” and “deep blue sea” are given too much metaphorical weight, even when used by a blind musician.\textsuperscript{236} While there is some validity to Rowden’s criticism, such catchphrases become arguably trite only through overuse by sighted speakers; blind singers instead would not only have been more sensitive to such statements, their inclusion carried an added layer of irony. Rowden’s other observation, that sighted singers “most often used the notion of blindness to provide a distinct image of personal misery,” counters Monge’s opinion that visual imagery acted as a psychological form of exorcism on blindness by the disabled musician. Since blind musicians rarely addressed their condition, Rowden contends, it was sighted people who had the problem with it.\textsuperscript{237} Yet we know through the above-mentioned scientific findings, that the blind can show a surprising propensity for visual data, thereby engaging in the development and assuagement of the blind’s psyche. As for those moments when someone like Davis sang about the condition, the “misery” he evoked should not be reduced, as Rowden would have it, to the empathy-inducing ploys of a street musician seeking tips. Perhaps, instead, we should consider that the pain and suffering Davis experienced as a result of his blindness was all too real, and that music was at once a vocation and a healing agency, not to mention one of the very few forums that invited self-reflection and commentary.


\textsuperscript{236}See Rowden, *The Songs of Blind Folk*, 40-42.

\textsuperscript{237}Ibid., 42-43.
Based on Monge’s survey of prewar blues and gospel singers, Davis averaged 1.78 visual mentions per song based on his 1935 sessions.\(^{238}\) This places him among the top artists (those with more than a handful of recorded tunes, that is) to have inserted visual imagery to such a high degree in their music – behind Blind Lemon Jefferson (2.43) and Blind Willie McTell (2.00) but more than Blind Joe Taggart (1.50), Blind Boy Fuller (1.40), Blind Willie Johnson (1.10), Sonny Terry (.93), and Blind Blake (0.89), and comparable to Arizona Dranes (1.75). Of course, most of Davis’s references are covert, including aphoristic sayings generally associated with things beyond literal sight such as “See what a fix she left me in” – although even here, one could argue that Davis is imploring others to look on or appreciate a situation he himself cannot see.

When looking at the same material, and using essentially the same rationale, I arrive at a higher count – and before I continue, let me say that, in deciding what to consider a visual reference, I have adhered by and large to Monge’s criteria. These include use of “see” and “look,” of course, but also “find” and “found” to imply a discovery involving sight (as in “I found another man was in my stall”); yet, like Monge, I have ignored cases where the word “see” clearly refers to the act of understanding rather than sight, as in “See, she got me started in wickedness” (from a later performance by Davis of “Cross and Evil Woman Blues”). Other allowances include: colors; light and dark; the negation of sight (i.e., blindness as well as phrases such as “put out your light”); activities and gestures that imply sight such as driving a car, shooting a gun, running, hunting, reading, writing, counting money, sewing, and the delineation of time; acts involving eye-body coordination; and bodily descriptions that assume the use of sight

(height, shape, skin color, gait, facial expressions, et al. (and while it is true that the blind can often function well in many of the above situations, from telling time with a Braille watch or a watch with the glass cover removed to shooting a gun, such messaging in a song would have instilled a visual image or perception in the mind of the listener, as Monge argues, and has been counted as a result). Also, phrases of repetition such as a refrain or the second A line in a blues are counted once. And each performance of a particular song is considered a separate entry since lyrics can vary, sometimes greatly, from one take to the next.

But I have also set certain limits of my own. I’m not willing to accept what Monge admits are “weak usages,” such as the Blind Lemon Jefferson phrase “I’m standing front of this baker shop” (an act not necessitated on one’s ability to see).239 Also, I have chosen to count as one entry any collective visual reference, where several sight-dependent observations work to create a larger singular image. For example, when Davis sings in “Delia,” “That telegram boy with a telegram, he handed it to me, I read it, and it, it read my Delia was dead,” he employs back-to-back visual references to create what I consider one overall image; the same goes for the line in “Whistlin’ Blues, “She was lookin’ at me, and I was lookin’ at her,” which I consider one visual reference, not two. I discard certain actions such as “get down on your bended knees” or “I’m going away to worry you off my mind” since neither case is predicated on having sight – the blind, after all, can be just as peripatetic and mobile as any sighted person. I have ignored descriptive phrases that have no true visual content such as “My good gal packed her suitcase, walked off, and left poor me.” And, in the case of conventional rhyming schemes, as in the many contrastive stanzas Davis generated using the conceit of a yellow, brown, and

black “gal,” I have counted only the first such mention since it behaved as a frame for subsequent lyrical invention.

With all of the above in mind, I have reached a different figure than Monge, albeit one which strengthens his general hypothesis that visual references in songs of the blind are surprisingly abundant, serving to exorcize the condition of blindness through verbal interjections of sight. Though Davis’s prewar secular baseline is too small to make firm judgments, his two recorded blues show a total of four visual references for two references per song (Monge, on the other hand, lists a perplexing 16). But of the 12 gospel performances, 30 visual references occur – 14 alone in “Lord, I Wish I Could See” – resulting in 2.5 mentions per song (Monge, by contrast, lists only nine total references among the twelve tunes). My total then is 34 references spread among 14 songs, or 2.43 mention per song (see Appendix Sixteen). Granted, the results are skewed by the visual fecundity in “Lord, I Wish I Could See,” (in which I included both sight and the negation of sight, i.e., blindness), and if only its six overt references to sight are considered, the average drops to two per song. But it is still a decidedly higher number than Monge indicates and is closer to the visual cornucopia he found in the music of Blind Lemon Jefferson. More interestingly, Davis’s high visual percentage in his religious music contradicts Monge’s findings that, “‘Lord, I Wish I Could See’ aside, blind gospel artists tended to ignore their blindness in song.

We also have the benefit of later recordings to compare in the case of Davis whose revival era music was just as marked by visually-referent and allusive language, from songs such as “Come Down and See Me Sometime” to “There’s Destruction in This
Land,” in which Davis sang, “As you take up news in these papers, the first thing you read is death.”

Worth noting is that when Davis does use visualizations, they tend to be very strong. “I Am the Light of the World,” as explained previously, takes on a whole different, hermeneutic level when its Biblical context – the story of a blind man who is healed by Jesus – is considered. His 1949 recording of “I’m Gonna Meet You at the Station” not only used the familiar line, “I may be blind and I cannot see,” in a way that commented at once on lack of spiritual and physical sight, but filled the song’s sermonettes with a number of strong visual references:

“I’m Gonna Meet You at the Station”

(Spoken: I’m gonna catch that train one of these days.)

Oh, when the train come along, when the train come along,
I’m gonna meet you at the station when the train, when the train, train come along.

Lord, I may be blind and I cannot see.
I’m gonna meet you at the station when the train, when the train, train come along.

(Spoken: Now you read in the Bible, see where God called John on the mountain. We was told ol’ John was in the spirit on our Lord’s day. Give ol’ John the ink and pen, told John to write Revelation. John, he looked, saw a number coming, and he saw it was a hundred and forty-four thousand.)

Cryin’, I’ll meet you at the station when the train, train come along.
I’m gonna meet you at the station when the train, when the train, train come along.

Well, I may be crippled and I cannot walk.

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I’m gonna meet you at the station when the train, when the train, train come along.

(Spoken: John looked again, saw a number comin’ that was a number that no man could number. Comin’ on the [right] side of the mountain, bearin’ their burden in the heat of the day, some come by weeping, some come moanin’, and some heads wet with the midnight dew.)

Cryin’, Lord, I’ll meet you at the station when the train, train come along. I’m gonna meet you at the station when the train, when the train, train come along.

Building on the analysis given to “Whistlin’ Blues” in Chapter Three, all its visual references come early in each performance, supporting the notion that the song served as a symbolic, transformative experience for Davis, who moved from one state of awareness – sight/rationality – to another – sound/intuition. As he said in one performance, “I wanted to get where I could hear something.”242 “Whistlin’ Blues” also contained one of the most beguiling images ever offered by a blind musician, “She had hair like Mary and walked just like the Lord” (usually found in traditional verse as “hair like Jesus,” i.e., long hair). Still, the description implies sight in order to comprehend it, both for Davis and listener, even if the exact visual of Mary’s hair and a walking Lord must be left to the imagination of the listener. So strikingly precise is the language one forgets the image is incredibly vague, yet it succeeds in a more deeply archetypal way that no concrete description could ever match.

In a survey of visual imagery in Davis’s extant recordings of secular song with lyrics, the count is indeed quite high. Later secular material by Davis was played usually in the context of a concert or in an informal home setting, both of which offered more opportunity to develop and extend lyrical conceits beyond the three-minute confines of a

commercial record. In examining the 94 extant secular recordings of 34 different tunes with lyrics made between 1935 and 1971 (see Appendix Seventeen), 251 visual mentions are made, averaging 2.67 mentions per song, higher than Jefferson against a comparable field of recordings (slightly under 100 for each), though other issues and contexts, as mentioned above, favor Davis.

This tally only increases when we consider several instrumentals by Davis that, while not quantifiable in a way that language can afford, were unarguably rich with visual imagery. The panoramic “Soldier’s Drill” (discussed in depth in Chapter Five) imitated the action of battle, while Davis’s harmonica repertory (see Chapter Seven) reveled in the imagery of animals, chases, and trains, resulting in a type of sound-picture unique to the harmonica that one writer aptly christened “rural impressionism.” Such evocations might explain why Davis enjoyed playing the harmonica as much as he did and why he always kept one on his person. The total impression, however, bolsters Monge’s assertion that blind gospel artists, if they mentioned their condition, did so indirectly and without spiritual appeal, while blind blues artists did so less matter-of-factly through more associative and/or contrastive means—Davis did both, it turns out, filling his lyrics with visual references and allusions in both secular and sacred material alike but saving the most candid mentions for his gospel material.

Yet the visuality of a blind performer’s oeuvre is but one way to understand the choices that go into such a musician’s texts. When a deficiency arises with sight, other

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244 Monge, “Blindness Blues,” 112.
senses can take over, often leading to compensatory tactility and hyperacusis.\textsuperscript{245} Blindness, therefore, can be understood as well through songs with acute references to sound, taste and smell. “He gave me a horn and he told me to blow,” Davis sang on “Oh Glory, How Happy I Am,” while in “Children of Zion,” he sang about how “I rapped and I rapped in the mercy of the door ’til my head got wet with the midnight dew.” One of the more curious songs in this regard was “She Wouldn’t Say Quit,” a hokum-type vaudeville number in which Davis pushed the boundaries of courtship propriety to ridiculous – and violent – extremes. In one performance, he rattled off 28 verses worth noting for how Davis makes his initial advances – “I put my hand on her;” “I began to rub her;” “I began to pat her;” “I pat her on the knee;” “I went a little higher”\textsuperscript{246} – all information gathered through the touch-based perceptions of the blind.

But many of the situations and emotional states found in Davis’s songs operate with a tacit awareness of blindness – those conditions of helplessness, abandonment, and adversity which Davis frequently sang about in songs like “I Cannot Bear My Burden By Myself” without the need to comment directly on his disability. One could argue further that, whether it was the distrust in people that permeated his blues or the promise of God’s healing intervention in his religious material, all experiential data and emotional frames of reference as found in his songs were filtered through Davis’s blindness.\textsuperscript{247}

\textsuperscript{245}Dr. Thomas Gettlefinger, interviewed by the author, 4 February 2009.

\textsuperscript{246}Reverend Gary Davis, “She Wouldn’t Say Quit,” in concert at Bucks Rock Summer Camp, New Milford, Conn., 12 August 1970; unissued, on FT-4696 from the Bob Carlin Collection, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

\textsuperscript{247}As Monge writes regarding the lyrical concerns of Blind Lemon Jefferson, his less-than-healthy relationships and regard toward women as heard in song were “not the prime mover of his alienation but only its logical consequence. Whether surfacing or not, it is blindness that paradoxically works as a sort of guiding thread that runs through all of his repertoire, whatever the theme that Jefferson treats.” Monge, “The Language of Blind Lemon Jefferson,” 66. Of course, it is worth noting, as Monge also reminds, that
Visual referents and the full awareness Davis offered up of his blindness in song also intensified his themes, magnifying elements of isolation and separation that were already part and parcel of African American life and deflecting through art the marginalizing effects of “Otherness.” As a consequence, Davis the bluesman could pluck irony from a line such as, “Why you treat me just like I was some man that has never been seen,” (from “Cross and Evil Woman Blues” and used as well in Blind Lemon Jefferson’s “Match Box Blues”), where his “invisible” status as blind, black, poor, and itinerant piled on one another in concentric layers of injustice. Finally, manipulation of language and message become even more beguiling in cases where a blind singer such as Davis acted out vicariously through song what would have otherwise been impossible or prohibited in real life. From the flamboyant insertion of gun imagery to the suggestion that the blind singer could “see” all that was going on, the audience was made to recalibrate their own “sight” and look differently on a performer who might otherwise be judged with pity or neglect.

What Monge’s writings and my case study follow-up show is that there is more self-reflective commentary within the texts of blind singers about their disability than a cursory examination would suggest. Whether Davis conjures these images any more or less than other blind (or sighted) musicians is a topic worthy of additional research. Clearly, more study is needed in this area, and it can only yield further insight into Davis’s character, calling and, most of all, creativity.

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249 One study waiting to be done would be an analysis of the thousands of hymns by famed composer Fanny Crosby through the lens of her blindness.
Reverend Gary Davis should not have made it, in life nor in music. He was born during the height of the Jim Crow era in the South, surviving blindness, alienation, discrimination, and the ever-present threat of violence, all compounded by the unforgiving milieu of life on the street. At the time he was given his first opportunity to record in 1935, his brand of guitar evangelism was on its way out. Nearly two decades passed with little alternative but to make money through busking and preaching to small storefront congregations, further marginalized as he was from the mainstream church – he wasn’t even known within the gospel community of Harlem. During the folk revival, he could have easily been forgotten as well. Blues and guitar-loving crowds were not necessarily willing to embrace proselytizing with their music, and within the concurrent Civil Rights struggle, black audiences were not ready to invest in a reminder of the Jim Crow past. In addition, his turn-of-the-century musical perspective, tastes, and repertoire made him an outdated figure within then-contemporary black culture, where urban electric blues, soul, and funk were the popular forms of the day. As Mark Humphrey observed when writing about another guitar evangelist, blind Georgia multi-instrumentalist Reverend Pearly Brown: “By 1966, men like Brown were anachronisms, 

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1 According to Ernie Hawkins in talking with longtime Harlem pastor Marie Knight, who ultimately recorded a Davis tribute album, Let Us Get Together: A Tribute to Reverend Gary Davis (M. C. Records, MC-0058, 2007); Ernie Hawkins, interview by author, 8 August 2008, Fur Peace Ranch, Pomeroy, Ohio, tape recording.
remnants of a bitter past in a seemingly progressive America waging war on poverty and making strides towards becoming a Great Society.”

So why Davis? For starters, as a participant in the Great Migration, he arrived in New York City at the perfect time to work himself into a cast of expatriate Southern peers, from Lead Belly to Sonny Terry, who collectively helped define and legitimize the nascent folk and blues revival. More importantly, once in New York, he was willing to teach in a serious manner, something not every player of his generation did, and he taught in a pivotal city for the folk movement. As a result, he attracted many students who went on to become leading musicians themselves. And in taking his brand of evangelism from the street to the festival stage, he made vital use of what has been called “emergent culture,” reinvesting for himself and his audiences old songs and contexts with new meaning and experience.

This case study has, I hope, shown how music acted as a lifeline and source of identity and commentary for the ministering guitarist – virtuosity as a means to negotiate through an otherwise impartial and unforgiving world. To apply the telling words one informant shared with Romanian ethnomusicologist Constantin Brailoiu: “My good luck is that I can sing.” In the preceding pages, I have assembled a repertoire baseline culled from the examination of more than 1,400 recordings, including nearly 850 documented performances by Davis. This resultant data has been quantified in terms of sessions, commercial releases, keys, secular/sacred breakdown, lyric transcriptions and analysis,

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3For thoughts on emergent culture, see Richard Bauman, Verbal Art as Performance (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1977), 48.

and comparative charts of Davis’s gospel and blues contemporaries (much of it listed in full in the appendices). In addition, I have dealt with cultural and physiological aspects and issues such as lynching and blindness, have found mythic and symmetrical structures in his blues that speak to the role such music can play in addressing conflict and resolution, and provided musicological and biographical detail upon which to build further research both on Davis and on other pre-WWII Piedmont folk-blues and gospel musicians. I have also tried to show how musicological analysis should be a necessary part of any contextual study on such a musician, helping to reveal the deep level of technique and thought processes behind even the most intuitive-sounding traditional music, and how, by better understanding the mechanics of the music, we can better appreciate its maker.

Reverend Gary Davis was truly in his own league, as singular and forceful a talent as the guitarist he most respected, Blind Blake, or other traditional African American guitarists such as Blind Willie Johnson and Blind Willie McTell, all paragons of technique and expressivity on their instrument. Because Davis lived long enough to gain widespread fame thanks to the folk and blues revival, he was able to demonstrate the totality of his musicianship beyond the parameters of prewar blues and gospel categories, challenging the way we think about so-called “folk blues” and gospel guitarists. So vast was his repertoire of dance numbers, rags, traditional song, minstrelsy, banjo and harmonica tunes, balladry, and past pop hits, that it rivaled the American folk songbook of Lead Belly for range and quantity. As my research shows, Davis not only played more secular material than previously assumed, but it accounted for nearly half of his total recorded output.
Also from this study, we can see how Davis found reclamation of self through adversity, an “exaggeration of the ‘black man’s burden,’”5 in the words of Ben Sidran, where blindness, blackness, and “blue-ness” met up with a steadfast trust in God that allowed Davis to endure what must have been an impossibly hard life at times. But he also lived long enough to enjoy the fruits of his labor as a concert draw, teacher, and minister. As former student Joan Fenton says: “He had his house. He had his car. He had a good, safe life. And I think that was huge.”6

There are more avenues of research than this paper – primarily a repertory study – can contain. Foremost, a proper biography still waits. In his history of Piedmont prewar blues, Red River Blues, Bruce Bastin provided the best portrait yet of Davis’s life prior to his move to New York City. Yet many things about his early years remain enigmatic, including possible filial connections to Alabama (where Davis’s father apparently died), and there remains no full biographical account of the last thirty years of Davis’s life and of his place and reputation within the folk revival.

Other worthy areas include a thematic index of Davis’s lyrical and musical motifs, especially a chart showing the cross-relation of guitar ideas based on key/chord shape; analysis of his religious song in terms of Biblical references, beliefs, and affirmations, especially how lyrical choices revealed Davis’s views on topics such as sin, forgiveness, and eschatological concepts; analysis of his gospel music for the kinds of associative and contrastive symmetries found in his blues (one example is provided below); a study of visual imagery as it relates to his religious song; and a study on the


6Joan Fenton, interview by author, Davis & Elkins College, Elkins, West Virginia, digital tape, 16 July 2008
prevalence of non-visual sensory imagery, i.e., how much of a presence were hearing, smell, and touch in his lyrics given the overcompensation of those senses in blind people.

More generally speaking, a follow-up study on the prevalence of visual imagery in the lyrics of sighted prewar blues and gospel artists needs to be done to see if Luigi Monge’s conclusions about blind musicians hold merit – he used a small control group, but a larger study might reveal that perhaps many such phrases are mere convention after all, regardless of sight. The grouping of gospel song into melody contours and related families per Jeff Todd Titon’s analysis of blues melodies would be a valuable resource to have. And a serious comparative study between religious street singers and more mainstream gospel performers would be worthwhile.

Davis the preacher deserves a fuller look, especially in the themes, delivery, and development in his sermons. Two extant sermons have surfaced on record, and both possess traits of classic black folk preaching.\(^7\) The first, documented in the 1950s, explored themes built on Jonah – enduring one’s trials, looking inward at one’s own sin before judging others – while another from the 1960s hit on several topics, from spiritual preparedness to the need for honesty. While he was no Reverend C. L. Franklin, Davis could counsel and excite his congregants in both cases, displaying the valued rhetorical qualities of what Jon Michael Spencer has identified as parallel syntax (use of similar word endings), aphoristic iterations (use of repetition and return in a sermon’s theme), congregational call and response, and intoning (moving from speech to song in the course

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of a sermon). In the former sermon, he especially “hit a lick,” so to speak, finding the emotional, cathartic core of the sermon by intoning on the phrase “If we come together,” which oddly echoed the wounds of his own broken home as a child.

Finally, a look at how jokes worked in the music and life of Davis would be illuminating. Davis loved to tell jokes, often of a sexual nature, both in conversation and through the humorous couplets of his secular song. Joan Fenton remembered one favorite by the Reverend, who told her: “There’s two bulls up on the hill side, a young one and an old one, and all these cows down in the field. The young one says, ‘Let’s run down there and get us one or two of them.’ And the old bull says, ‘Let’s walk down and get ’em

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Another time, Davis reached under a table with his cane, grabbed Fenton’s leg, and then shouted at the top of his lungs, “I’m a goin’ fishin’! I’m a goin’ fishin’!”  As scholars have observed, jokes not only can comment on inadequacies of power and equality, but can act as proxy to redress a central conflict in a person’s life, i.e., laughing through the problem. Given the abundance of sexual innuendo in Davis’s music and speech, as in the above quips, we might find, upon further investigation, that such salaciousness in his wit served to counter the perceived harmlessness of the musician in terms of his masculinity because he was both blind and a minister.

Largely taciturn about many things in his life, Davis nonetheless found (mostly musical) ways to comment on aspects of who he was, what he had experienced, and the times he lived in. As he said during a performance of his live staple, “Come Down and See Me Sometime,” “When you get to the place that you don’t wanna talk, sing it!” Well aware of the power of song, Davis let his fingers do the talking, so to speak, while avoiding the ideological tugs of the folk movement. He could offer his perspective on the Vietnam conflict, for example, simply by playing “Masters of War” to his students or adding “Soldier’s Drill,” “There’s Destruction in This Land,” and “Death Don’t Have No Mercy” to his concert set lists. Davis didn’t need to say anything – the song was the comment. That’s not to say he didn’t offer his feelings forthrightly on such matters, as in

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9Ibid.

10Ibid.


121:30-1:32 into “Come Down and See Me Sometime” (listed as “Come Down and Meet Me Sometime”) on Reverend Gary Davis (Heritage HT CD 02, 1989).
the time he participated in a “Sing-In for Peace” at Carnegie Hall on 24 September 1965. More than fifty artists took part, including Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, Bernice Reagon, Phil Ochs, and Alan Lomax, all united against U. S. participation in the war. As the program stated, “The undersigned are gathered together for one purpose: to protest the immoral, irrational and irresponsible acts of war which our government carries out in Viet-Nam in our names.”13 More than a “gig” then, the concert allowed Davis rare political expression through a climate of musical and moral solidarity.

One topic absent at first glance, however, was the Civil Rights struggle. To paraphrase John A. and Alan Lomax when they wrote, “The frontier has been beaten back to the accompaniment of singing,”14 injustice was equally beaten back to the accompaniment of singing by generations of African Americans. Again, song became the forum for Davis to address the issue. In private, Davis offered his opinion, such as the time he told Roy Book Binder that, “If you cut your arm, and you cut my arm, what color is the blood? It’s the same. If everybody was blind there wouldn’t be [problems].”15 Yet he didn’t talk publicly about racial issues for any number of reasons. His age and his blindness would have kept him from being an active participant in the Civil Rights movement, which was energized and radicalized by a younger generation.16 In addition, years of having to practice guarded speech as a black man in the South would have also


made him hesitant to speak his mind on such matters. Davis articulated this position in a 1951 exchange with Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold:

Davis: Is a colored pusson got a machine gun? They ain’t got no machine gun. Is a colored pusson got a government? They ain’t got a government. Is a colored pusson got a country? If they is they not in it. They ain’t got no country.

Harold: What can ever be done to remedy that?

D: Well . . . it takes prayer. Thass what it’ll take.

H: Who is responsible for this injustice?

D: Well, fur me to try to tell ye, I’m scared I might give you the wrong answer, I couldn’t altogether say. Because, you know, I tole you befo, there’s so much you know I’m allowed to say, an so much I ain’t allowed to say. The things you say, if you don’t say what people want you to say to please them, you goin to lose your life. You got to say what they want you to say. An you bettah laugh when you say, like you’re pleased. If you don’t you’ll git killed anyhow. Thass what I say. You can’t do so much talk about nothing. I don’t want nobody to knock on my do [door], come to kill me, an I don’t know what it’s all about. I always say, when I die, I want to know what I’m dyin for. An as long as you got to walk on this earth anyhow, an ain’t got nobody wit you, it pay you not to do so much talking.17

Later in the interview, Davis elaborated on his perspective, and bear in mind that he was offering his thoughts to a white woman several years prior to the historical beginning of Civil Rights Movement. For the guitarist, who was nearly fifty-five at the time of the interview, all the best intentions by outsiders couldn’t eradicate the realities of discrimination and racial violence suffered by himself and other African Americans. For Davis, as it must have been for many African Americans, there was no appeal other than God.

17Reverend Gary Davis, interview by Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold, April/May 1951, TMs (photocopy), the Alan Lomax Archive, New York City, reel XI, pp. 3-4.
Davis: But all the feelin, that doesn’t make the thing be any better. They still kill em in the South, whenever they git ready. Bout that same thing. Colored pusson’s life ain’t no mo than a bird on a limb. Lynch you when they wanna. Shoot you when they please.

Harold: Will this cruelty and discrimination come to an end?

D: The Bible says so. In God’s own time. It perhaps might be in ouwah time, if we keep ouwah mouth shut an don’t do too much talking. You know, you can kill yourself by talking. You got many days to live. You don’t know how long. You can cut them days off by talking . . . The Bible says, the bottom rail will come to the top. The colored pusson that’s been undah the white people, aftah while, they’ll be the top. . . . Everybody will be one color. If they’re not one color, they’ll be one color anyhow. Mean to say, everybody will have their equal share. Everybody will be recognized as one people. An one language. Won’t be no dyin. Live forever. All murders will be done away with.18

Far from being passive in his thoughts on race, then, Davis shaped his hope for justice through the language of his Christian beliefs. Specifically, the righting of social wrongs on earth intertwined with what appear to be premillennialist views on the Second Coming (i.e., Christ returns, initiating a cosmic battle between good and evil before establishing his thousand-year reign on earth).

Harold: Where do you think heaven is?

Davis: I don’t have to tell you where I think it is; I’m gon tell you where I know it is. Where the Bible said. It’s gon be right heah. This earth’ll be burnt out an anothah earth will take its place. It’ll be a holy state. A holy place.

Harold: will there be trees and birds?

Davis: The Bible said there will be trees, and every leaf on the tree will be good for the healin of a nation. They’ll bear twelve mantles of fruit every mont, an then the leaves will be good for the healin of the nations. Won’t be no doctors. The doctors’ll be gone out of existence. No undertaker. Cause won’t nobody have to die. No confusion. Everybody be in love. Peaceful world. But somebody have to die before that happen. Somebody have to die. The world, the Bible says, aftah all

18Ibid., reel XII, pp. 2-3.
the sinnahs is burnt up into ashes, then we Christians will be walkin round heah on the earth wid the ashes of the sinnahs.\textsuperscript{19}

So while Davis the Christian preacher usually had more to say about spiritual than social transgressions, more about personal salvation than collective integration, both matters existed on the same moral plane for him. This, in turn, allows more subtle, complex readings of songs such as “I Told Jesus I’d Bear My Burden If He’d Write My Name,” “I’ll Be All Right” (which, as one of several sources for the Civil Rights anthem, “We Shall Overcome,” already resonated on several levels for Davis concert-goers\textsuperscript{20}) or the sing-along “Let Us Get Together Right Down Here,” which amplified audience participation into a communal act whether Davis sang it in a concert hall or liquor-plied party. A good example of his ability to manipulate messaging in that latter song is illustrated below, an eight-minute version at a private gathering that became the one moment everyone stopped talking long enough to unite in song.

\textsuperscript{19}Ibid., reel XII, p. 3.

| [Guitar intro] |  |
| Let us get together right down here (x4) |  |
| Let us get together right down here (x4) | Social union |
| Let us have our heaven right down here (x4) |  |
| Let us do our addressing right down here (x4) |  |
| Let us do our living right down here (x4) | Societal union |
| Let us live together right down here (x4) |  |
| Let us do our marching right down here. (x4) |  |
| Let us be good soldiers right down here. (x4) | Civil/political union |
| Let us die together right down here. (x4) |  |
| Let us fight together right down here. (x4) |  |
| [Guitar break, everyone clapping along] | Frames spiritual verses below |
| Let us mourn together right down here. (x4) |  |
| Let us bow together right down here. (x4) | Spiritual union |
| Let us pray together right down here. (x4) |  |
| [Guitar break] | Frames spiritual verses above |
| Let us walk together right down here. (x4) |  |
| Let us talk together right down here. (x4) | Reiteration of all parities, ending as it began with social assemblage. |
| Let us cry together right down here. (x4) |  |
| Let us be rejoicing right down here. |  |

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The simplicity of the construction, where only a few words changed from stanza to stanza within a repetitious AAAA form, invited participation to begin with, but then Davis shaped his words into a tiered message that reminded those who had gathered of the ways they were connected. Almost like a church-performed hymn, Davis played the first statement instrumentally as if he were cuing participants in the melody. The first three sung stanzas might then be said to embrace the revelry at hand, a social union formed through the celebratory bonds of the party. The next three stanzas expand the concept of togetherness to one of societal bond and propriety. The center verses then address the civil and political implications of union, and there is little activist ambiguity when Davis implores his sing-along group to “do our marching,” “be good soldiers,” and die and fight together. What follows is just as compelling, since Davis lifts the whole issue into the spiritual realm, a contemplative, redemptive gesture of unity through mourning, bowing and prayer that he sets in stark relief through the placement of guitar breaks before and after these key verses. Finally, he sums up the message with a quick return to all the types of parity hinted at in the song, concluding where he began, with the most immediate shared interest, the setting of the party – “let us be rejoicing right down here.”

It’s a wonderful example of how Davis could shape even a predictably constructed gospel song to meet the needs of a group, and how the associative symmetries that exist in his blues can be shown to exist in his sacred music as well. Mostly it shows that Davis, without having to “preach” about it, was very aware of what was going on in the world and felt compelled to contribute in the best way he knew how, through song. As mentioned in Chapter Five, Davis headlined a 1960 folk concert at
Columbia University to benefit the National Scholarship Service and Fund for Negro Students in aiding sit-in students expelled from college. Who knows what he sang at that show – and I’d like to think “Let Us Get Together” was part of the set – but even if he didn’t play one inspirational number or never uttered one topical word between songs, his presence spoke volumes. When told of this appearance by the typically reserved Davis, Maxine Smith, Civil Rights activist and longtime executive secretary of the Memphis NAACP, remarked, “But he felt it, didn’t he!”

To reiterate, most of Davis’s discourse came through religious song, homilies on spiritual grace and salvation that were also lessons in encouragement, affirmation, and solidarity from a God who had, after all, delivered his people more than once from slavery. Even without the many earthly rewards Davis received as a result of his talent, his self-worth had already been validated on high through God-given talents no man could ever deny – and with that in mind, perhaps we can also understand Davis’s well-noted arrogance when it came to his talent.

In looking at his music, we find a beautiful acceptance tale as well. The musical evidence would indicate that Davis the man came to be comfortable with who he was, human frailties included. The “sinful” tunes appeared in abundance once again in the 1960s not just because audiences wanted to hear them. Davis wanted to hear them, too, and share them (though, as we have seen, he saved most of that material for the confines of the home and private gatherings, and he showed moral consistency in speaking rather than singing the words to his blues material).

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22 Maxine Smith, conversation with author, 15 February 2009, home of Russell and Gina Sugarmon, Memphis, Tennessee.
If we consider song as a form of oral history, where identity and meaning emerge through the act of performance, it may go some way in explaining the resilient hold secular music had on Davis, especially post-conversion. Instead of rejecting his shadow, to use Jungian terminology, he found a way to incorporate that side of self into his new spiritual skin, and here, we might find philosophical parallels in the words of blues singer-cum-preacher Reverend Arnold Dwight “Gatemouth” Moore. His conversion tale was among the most dramatic for a bluesman. In 1949 while headlining at Chicago’s Club DeLisa, Moore took the stage, tried to sing, and “nothing came out,” in his words, until he launched uncontrollably into the gospel standard “Shine on Me.” It wasn’t long before he took up theological studies and began to preach as well as deejay on iconic black Memphis station WDIA. But like Davis, the charismatic minister ultimately reconciled singing blues to an audience, and in justifying his position Moore’s thoughts could equally apply to Davis:

The South don’t understand it. You know, I have no problem in the North or elsewhere. … This is the biggest trouble the black Christian has had; religion has been built upon emotion and superstition, instead of searching and knowing the truth for itself. I don’t teach that when it’s all over we’re going to get our reward. I say right now you get it – here on earth. I have them dying laughing in church. “Lord, if they only feed you milk and honey, I’ll starve to death in heaven. I want neck bones and ribs.”

Living in a place, New York City, far removed from the judgments of Southern Christianity, Davis, too, no doubt felt more agreeable about performing blues and secular

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song once again. To build on Moore’s perspective, both blues and gospel in essence operate as extensions of truth seeking, where one can aid the other in the same born-again musician – blues truth provides a way to negotiate through the physical world and gospel truth a way to rise above it. Blues, in particular, was an incredibly important forum to convey feelings and emotions that otherwise had to be sequestered by Southern blacks. To return to a quote by Davis about blues from Chapter Six, the overt meaning in blues may have been about male-female relationships, but one covert meaning was the importance music played in the venting of frustrations and conflict. Simply, if people can play music, they can better deal with their issues. Said Davis, “Blues come by your condition. Man gets worried about a woman he sit down and play about it if he can play. Woman get worried about a man, she sit down and sing about it.”

That the God of Davis’s time, culture, and denomination would approve of the blues might seem terribly revisionist, a byproduct perhaps of contemporary theological nuance and the inclusiveness from modern churches, many of which now offer blues concerts. Kim Capps is a United Methodist chaplain at University of Maryland in College Park and ordained minister who also performs blues in church. She likens the genre to psalms of lament and explains her position thus: “Theologically, it’s a difference between looking at God in a sense of relationship or looking at religion as a check list of dos and don’ts.”

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25 31:17-31:29 from CD 4 (Appendix 14) of private recording of Gary Davis at Dick Meltzer’s, Detroit, ca. 1964.

Had Davis adopted such a tenet, it would have allowed him to make peace with his musically secular side and would have made him more willing to share that side with others, which he did in abundance the last two decades of his life. We can see this self-acceptance within Davis as stemming from faith in a God who reconciled the great divide of human experience through a Christ who was not only savior but fellow traveler and, more importantly, fellow sufferer in African American Christianity.\(^{27}\) Even Davis’s notorious bad habits – drink, cigars, guns, knives, and flirtatious behavior – can be appreciated in a different light with the above in mind. There was certainly an element to the Baptist adage that “once saved, always saved,” for Davis, though the saying doesn’t imply a license to sin but instead speaks to the idea of perseverance in one’s faith, an ongoing commitment involved in discipleship rather than “cheap grace.”\(^{28}\)

Erstwhile Davis student Andy Cohen puts it another way. Davis was free to express himself outside the parameters of mainstream Christian dogma and tolerance because of those he associated with and when: he was, after all, an observer among participants to the Sexual Revolution. Says Cohen, “Davis allowed himself to be a flirt because those around him [allowed it]. Their theoretical bed was Marx for social issues and Freud for personal issues. These are not reconcilable – they didn’t care. He was a Baptist among lefties, so he didn’t think anything of it. He was already saved; they were already tolerant.”\(^{29}\)


\(^{29}\) Andy Cohen, interview by author, 18 June 2008, Memphis, Tennessee, digital recording.
If that was the case, he must have been encouraged by the perspective he acquired about humanity from all his years on the street, one that was circumspect and distrustful of people but also cognizant and perhaps more accepting of their (not to mention his) shortcomings. In describing Washington, D. C. gospel musician Flora Molton, blues harmonica player Phil Wiggins lists the kinds of qualities she honed as a street performer that made her such a beloved figure to those who played with her, qualities Davis brought as well to the relationships he had with his students – the hippies, lefties, and non-believers alike. Says Wiggins, “When I met Flora I was a pretty wild teenager, and she accepted me as I was. She didn’t like hypocrites, but she was not a judgmental person. She was very open to any kind of experience, and she had compassion for any kind of human condition.”

It’s not as if Davis didn’t feel guilt when he went too far. Once, at the Mariposa Folk Festival, he got so drunk, he fell out of his chair and off the stage. He was so mortified by his own behavior that he sat under a tree the entire next day and played for anybody who walked by. As he told Dick Waterman at the festival, “The devil put whiskey before me last night, and I was too weak to leave it.” Yet Davis could also chuckle through his weaknesses, suggesting he took such imperfections in stride. Recalls Lou Curtiss of one Davis visit to the West Coast: “A bunch of people took him to the San Diego Zoo. Mostly, he got the biggest kick out of touching ladies on the rear end. They’d look around and there’d be this blind man and a kid, and the kid would get the blame, and

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he just thought that was funny as hell. He came out here twice. The second time his wife was with him, and he wasn’t quite as animated.”

I argue that Davis very much knew himself – warts and all – and that he believed his God knew the same. Is there any wonder why the Biblical saga of Samson – a severely flawed man plucked to be God’s agent – was the musical minster’s signature tune?

Davis also showed full acceptance of and control over his blindness. He never complained about it, at least before friends and students. Rather, “he did what he had to do,” in the words of Jorma Kaukonen. Indeed, when faced with societal estrangement, Davis sought interaction and an autonomous lifestyle, reinforced ironically by what should have been a network of personal, social, and cultural obstacles: his blindness could have crippled his will to succeed but instead created the template for lifelong independence; he came of age at a time when African Americans were denied rights, often violently so, but were also encouraged as a result to embrace self-reliance; and his early musical choices, from blues to street performance, demanded surety of self on numerous levels. Like many blind people, Davis rejected segregation into blind-only social groups in favor of assimilation into the sighted world, where he displayed a Type II socialization, that is, he was largely if not entirely independent when based on four factors of employment, travel, eating, and shopping. Davis lived with relative

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33Lou Curtiss, telephone interview by author, 3 August 2009, digital recording.

34Jorma Kaukonen, interview by author, 10 August 2008, Fur Peace Ranch, Pomeroy, Ohio, tape recording.

independence because he played the guitar. His musical abilities created a mutual relationship between him and society that benefited Davis through recognition and an income, but also allowed those who would normally have been uncomfortable around the blind to interact with and engage Davis through the lens of his talent.\footnote{Robert A. Scott, \textit{The Making of Blind Men: A Study of Adult Socialization} (New Brunswick, N. J.: Transaction Books, 1981), 108.} In the process, he usurped the traditional social roles and stereotyping of the blind. Blindness arguably intensified his religious conviction, as well. Would he have stayed a bluesman had he had sight, or would he have even been a musician at all? As a blind man, Davis was consumed by a world of darkness; as a sacred musician and preacher, that world became one of light: of spiritual light, the light of self-awareness, the light of hope and transformative rebirth.

Finally, if, as Mark Anthony Neal writes, African American culture has been partly defined by its covert social spaces – especially in the South where the juke and church allowed a public conversation and challenge to the limitations of black life\footnote{Mark Anthony Neal, \textit{What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Popular Culture} (New York: Routledge, 1999), 49.} – Davis found his own covert space in the confines of his home, where the encapsulation of all he was came not through the identity of entertainer but that of teacher. His secularist students became nothing short of disciples, given a moral compass by music that was all sacred in the sense that it was “just a good feeling that the good Master gives you – a spiritual feeling,” to borrow the words of another musical reverend, Leon Pinson.\footnote{Alan Young, “‘I Get Songs, Sing ’Em and Play ’Em’,” \textit{Blues & Rhythm} 86 (February 1994): 7.} In his own way, Davis celebrated a progressive black America as much as the architects of soul music were doing. His audiences may have been largely white folk fans, but he was
presenting the full humanity of what it was like to be black and blind in America, and the full evidence of what it was like to be saved and to have overcome.

“There is plenty of pity for the blind, but of friendship or comradeship very little,” wrote blind organist Alfred Collins in his autobiography. “It is almost as though they were condemned to be a race apart.”39 For Davis, music combined with faith and personal fortitude gave him a seat at the table. Music gave Davis a platform, a home, and a dignified life. It became an agent of change and transcendence against racial and economic strife. He came to New York City on the other side of the Harlem Renaissance but he was a manifestation of its spirit nonetheless, a journey from the rural South that finally placed him in a supportive community where he could sing his history and seek the kind of kinship that healed all wounds.


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Seabrooks, Ruth Kate. Interview by Bernard West, Wrens, Georgia, 3 February 1979. MSS 637 Box 21. Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Georgia.


Seeger, Mike. Liner notes to Elizabeth Cotten, *Freight Train and Other North Carolina Folk Songs and Tunes*. Smithsonian/Folkways SF 40009, 1989.


______. “Folk Music: Old and Young Stars at Town Hall; Clancy Brothers and Makem, Davis Sing – Sonny Terry and Oscar Brand Also Heard.” New York Times, 19 September 1960, p. 42.


______. “Folk Bill Given by Jack Elliot; 1,000 Cheer ‘Citybilly’ in His Town Hall Debut.” New York Times, 1 May 1965, food p. 18.


“We Are Soldiers in the Army.” *Sing Out!* 11, no. 1 (February-March 1961): 32.


Young, Alan. “‘I Get Songs, Sing ‘Em and Play ‘Em’.” *Blues & Rhythm* 86 (February 1994): 4-7.


GARY DAVIS SOURCES


Disc Dialogue (record reviews of Children of Zion and Ragtime Guitar). 


Record review of O Glory (Adelphi 1008), by Reverend Gary Davis. 


Liner notes, Reverend Gary Davis, Pure Religion & Bad Company. 

Liner notes, Rev. Gary Davis, Demons and Angels: The Ultimate Collection. 


Davis, Annie, New York City, various correspondences between 1963 and 1977 to Folklore Productions, Boston, Massachusetts and Santa Monica, California. Private collection, Folklore Productions, Santa Monica, California.

Davis, Gary. Interview by Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold, April/May 1951. TMs (photocopy). The Alan Lomax Archive, New York City.


_______. “Candyman.” Guitar Player 8, no. 3 (March 1974): 44.


______. Record review of From Blues to Gospel, by Reverend Gary Davis. Living Blues 104 (July/August 1992): 59.


“‘I Never Was Shy Around None of Them Guitar Players’.” *Blues & Rhythm* 69 (May 1992): 7


Record review of *Blues and Ragtime*, by Reverend Gary Davis. *Blues & Rhythm* 81 (August 1993): 29


INTERVIEWS BY AUTHOR


Gettlefinger, Thomas, Dr. Interview by author, 4 February 2009. Germantown, Tennessee. Digital recording.


Johnson, James “Super Chikan”. Interview by author, 17 August 2007, Clarksdale, Mississippi. Digital recording.


Shoumatoff, Alex. Telephone interview by author, 30 June 2008. Digital recording.


CONSULTED RECORDINGS
(Note: Recordings consulted in my dissertation are listed below by release year of the recording medium in which I encountered the music. Since most were on compact disc, they reflect the date a particular recording came out in that format. For a list of Davis recordings in historically chronological order, see Appendix 3. Davis’s records here are alphabetical by the name under which the music was released and then chronological under that.)

DAVIS ON RECORD


________. “Gary Davis at Buck’s Rock, 8-12-70.” Bob Carlin Collection, FT-4696, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Digital copy.


**DAVIS AND HIS MUSIC ON FILM**


OTHER RECORDINGS


Blind Blake, Ragtime Guitar’s Foremost Fingerpicker (Yazoo 1068, 1990)


Various artists. **Folk Festival.** Transatlantic TRA 324, 1976.


APPENDIX 1: UNITED STATES CENSUS DATA ON REVEREND GARY DAVIS

1930 Census: Taken April 5, 1930, a Gary Bland [sic] Davis, age 30 (b. 1900), single and no job, is listed as a lodger in Durham, North Carolina (birthplace, South Carolina). A small scribbled word written to the right of “Gary” on the census form appears to be “Blind” or, just as probable, “Bland” – Davis had shared his 410 Poplar residence at one point with a Robert Bland and wife. Though Davis would have been closer to turning 33 or 34, this is undoubtedly our musician. In addition, we find an Evelyn Davis residing in Spartanburg, South Carolina, renting and living alone yet listed as married. Age 49, she is listed as laundress and the form states she was married at 18. Assuming the age is incorrect, this is likely Davis’s mother, who had spent a brief time in nearby Fountain Inn and joined Davis in Durham a short time later.

In addition, we also find a good candidate for Davis’s future wife Annie in the 1930 census. An African American woman, Annie R. Wright, age 30 (born around 1900), is listed as living in Raleigh, North Carolina, with her husband Edward Wright (a hotel cook), and two daughters, Elizabeth A. Wright, 10, and Ruby Wright, 5. Prior to marrying Gary Davis, Annie, who was based in Wake County, had been married with two daughters. Welfare files on Gary Davis identify one of the daughters as a Ruby, single and age 20 in 1944, which would put her age at 5 or 6 for the 1930 census. Also, the same welfare letter identifies a seven-year-old granddaughter by the other daughter, unnamed, which would have meant she gave birth around the not-so-improbable age of 17 if she was the above-documented Elizabeth, age 10.

When we do a cross search, the likelihood increases that Annie R. Wright is our likely candidate, since the above listing is the only census match for a daughter named Ruby with a mother named Annie in North Carolina.

Though Annie’s middle name was Bell, it’s possible the census taker mistakenly wrote an R. instead of a B. A discrepancy in the birth date might also prove more right than wrong. It is generally acknowledged that Annie was slightly older than Gary, and that she died at age 102 in December 1997, which would put her birth around 1895. In the 1930 census the above female is listed as having a birth year of approximately 1900. This would seem incorrect but actually corresponds to a letter by Annie stating that she was 44, four years younger (!) than Davis, when they married in 1943. If this were correct, it would put her birth year around 1899.

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1No WWI draft registration card could be found for Gary Davis.


3Case #282, 29 August 1944 letter from A. V. Jenkins, assistant case supervisor, City of New York Department of Welfare, to W. E. Stanley, superintendent of Durham County Public Welfare, Spottswood Collection, Library of Congress. Tiny and James Robinson remembered the second daughter’s name as Ruth; Tiny and James Robinson, interview by author, Brentwood, Tennessee, 1 August 2008, digital tape.

4Annie Davis, 29 June 1970 letter to Nancy Kubo, courtesy of Folklore Productions. A marriage certificate has yet to be located.
Adding to the speculation, Annie’s maiden name is often given in biographical mentions on Davis as Wright (her first husband’s surname) when in actuality it was McDowell. Yet on the marriage certificate she gave Hicks. Curiously, the name of her other daughter’s child, who lived with the Davises briefly in New York, was Frances Hicks, implying the daughter’s last name was Hicks as well. This would suggest possibly that Annie had two daughters from different fathers or that her mother remarried at some point.

1920 Census: A Garey Davis, 23, is listed as a street musician in Greenville, South Carolina, renting with wife Mary Davis, 28. His father and mother are listed as born in South Carolina, which we also know to be true.

1910 Census: Taken April 19, 1910, a Gary Davis, 5, is listed as the youngest son to Eveline Davis, 37, (b. 1873), mother, farm laborer, widow, in Laurens township, Laurens County, South Carolina. The other children are Rosa Davis, 16, daughter; Pleasy Davis, 13, daughter; and Wister Davis, 12, son. Given what we know about Gary Davis, he and Wister seem to have been reversed in the census.

1900 and 1890 Census: Nothing on Davis turned up; the 1890 census is almost nonexistent, so there is good chance that little useful information can ever be retrieved from it.

The 1900 Census offers a probable candidate, however, for his second wife, Annie Davis (nee McDowell). Listed as living in Lumber Bridge, Robeson County, North Carolina (on the South Carolina border about 80 miles south of Raleigh and Wake County, where Annie lived much of her adult life prior to New York), we find an African American female, Anna B. McDowell, age 4, born February 1896 in North Carolina to parents George (day laborer) and Marilla. Two younger siblings are also listed: Lucia, age 2, and Beatins, age 1.

1880 Census: An Evelina Cheek (possibly Gary Davis’s mother) is listed as daughter and the sixth of eight children to father Samuel Cheek (farmer, b. c. 1840 in North Carolina) and mother Adeline Cheek (housekeeper, b. c. 1840 in South Carolina) of Scuffletown, Laurens County, South Carolina. Evelina’s age is given as 7, b. ca. 1873, which corresponds to Davis’s mother age; in addition, Davis referred to his grandmother by name as Eveline Cheek.

1870 Census: Samuel and Adaline Cheek, both 28, are listed in Scuffletown as farmers with three children (Evelina not yet born).

1850 Census: Many white Cheeks are listed as living in Laurens County, South Carolina; no blacks are listed, but it is possible that the African American Cheeks on Davis’s side of the family had been slaves who later took the surname of their former owners once freed.

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5 Annie Davis, 29 May 1967 letter to Nancy Kubo, courtesy of Folklore Productions.
6 Annie Davis, 29 June 1967 letter to Nancy Kubo, courtesy of Folklore Productions.
APPENDIX 2: REVEREND GARY DAVIS SESSIONOGRAPHY

23 July 1935 (Gary Davis’s 23-26 July 1935 sessions for the American Record Company were issued as “Blind Gary”; all of Davis’s sessions reissued on Document DOCD-5060, 1991/1994; Yazoo 2011, 1994/2001; Catfish Records 146, 2000; and JSP Records JSP7759, 2006; ▲ Pirate Records MPC 526, c. 1966; ● Yazoo L-1023, 1970):

- “I’m Throwing Up My Hands (Ain’t Gonna Work Here No More)” (ARC 35-10-16)
- “Cross and Evil Woman Blues” (ARC 35-10-16)

Blind Boy Fuller: “Baby, I Don’t Have to Worry (’Cause That Stuff Is Here)” (Gary Davis, 2d g; ARC 35-10-17)

Blind Boy Fuller: “I’m a Rattlesnakin’ Daddy” (Gary Davis, 2d g; ARC 6-01-56)

Blind Boy Fuller: “I’m Climbin’ on Top of the Hill” (Gary Davis, 2d g; ARC 35-10-32)

24 July 1935:

Bull City Red: “Now I’m Talking About You” (Gary Davis, 2d g; ARC 5-12-57)

Blind Boy Fuller: “Ain’t It a Cryin’ Shame?” (Gary Davis, 2d g; ARC 35-10-32)

Blind Boy Fuller: “Looking for My Woman” (Gary Davis, 2d g; ARC 35-10-17)

25 July 1935:

- “I Am the True Vine” (ARC 5-12-66)
  “I Am the Light of the World” (ARC 5-12-66)
- “O Lord, Search My Heart” (ARC 35-10-33)

▲ Bull City Red: “I Saw the Light” (Gary Davis, g; ARC 6-05-65)

Blind Boy Fuller: “Rag, Mama, Rag” (Gary Davis, 2d g, Bull City Red, wb; two takes, second issued as ARC 6-01-56)

1 I have distinguished between a sessionography (Appendix 2) and a discography (Appendix 3) since the first emphasizes when songs were recorded and the second indicates when songs were commercially released and how they have been packaged. Unless otherwise noted, all sessions were recorded in New York City. This sessionography was compiled and then revised by the author from the following sources: Robert M. W. Dixon, John Godrich, and Howard Rye, Blues & Gospel Records, 1890-1943, 4th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); Les Fancourt and Bob McGrath, The Blues Discography 1943-1970 (West Vancouver, Canada: Eyeball Productions, 2006); Cedric Hayes and Robert Laughton, The Gospel Discography 1943-1970 (West Vancouver, Canada: Eyeball Productions, 2007); Mike Leadbitter and Neil Slaven, Blues Records: 1943-1970 – A Selective Discography, 2d ed. (London: Record Information Services, 1987); Robert Tilling, ‘Oh, What a Beautiful City’: A Tribute to the Reverend Gary Davis (1896-1972) (Jersey, U. K.: Paul Mill Press, 1992), and the website http://www.wirz.de maintained by German blues fan Stefan Wirz. As in the albums appendix, corrected or clarified titles of songs are given in brackets where necessary.

2 Davis referred to this song as “Mountain Jack.”

3 Davis referred to this song as “Ice Pick Blues,” a more appropriate title than the one the label apparently gave.

4 I have opted to include the Blind Boy Fuller sessions as listed in Blues & Gospel Records, which credits Davis as second guitarist on Fuller’s first seven sides, though he is only discernable (and barely at that) on four: “I’m Climbin’ on Top of the Hill;” “Ain’t It a Cryin’ Shame;” “Rag, Mama, Rag;” and “Baby You Gotta Change Your Mind.”
Blind Boy Fuller: “Baby, You Gotta Change Your Mind” (Gary Davis, 2d g, Bull City Red, wb; ARC 6-03-60)

26 July 1935:
● “You Can Go Home” (ARC 7-04-55)
● “Twelve Gates to the City” (ARC 7-04-55)
● “You Got to Go Down” (ARC 35-10-33)
● “I Belong to the Band – Hallelujah!” (ARC 6-02-65)
● “The Great Change in Me” (ARC 6-02-65)
“Lord, I Wish I Could See” (unissued)
▲ ● “Have More Faith in Jesus” (ARC 6-11-63)
▲ ● “Lord, Stand By Me” (ARC 6-05-65)
▲ ● “The Angel’s Message to Me” (ARC 6-11-63)

Bull City Red: “Black Woman and Poison Blues” (Gary Davis, 2d g; ARC 6-02-56)
Bull City Red: “Mississippi River” (Gary Davis, 2d g; ARC 6-06-55)

“Civil War March”⑤

“I Cannot Bear My Burden by Myself”
“I’m Gonna Meet You at the Station”⑥

1950 (Folkways LP 5581):
“Guitar Solo” (a.k.a. “Twelve Sticks”)⑦

1952 (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings SFWCD 40123, 2003).⑧
“Get Right Church”
“Say No to the Devil”
“Twelve Gates to the City”

⑤Listed as “Civil War Parade” in its reissue on Smithsonian Folkways SFWCD 40123, 2003.

⑥There is speculation that Brownie McGhee plays second guitar here and that the actual session date was January 1945; see Chris Smith, “A Number That (Almost) No Man Could Number,” Blues & Rhythm 118 (April 1997): 7.

⑦Recorded on the corner of Sixth Avenue and 46th Street by Tony Schwartz, this is the only recording we have of Davis as a street performer. This song has been given a variety of titles, including “The Boy was Kissing the Girl,” though Davis most often referred to it as “Twelve Sticks.”

⑧Although the Smithsonian Folkways release dates all the John Cohen-recorded numbers from 1953, Cohen’s tapes at the University of North Carolina distinguish between sessions done in 1952 and 1953; see the Joan Fenton Collection, FT-1340, FT-1341, and FT-1342 in the Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
“I Belong to the Band”
“The Uncloudy Day” (Reverend McKinley Peebles, v; Davis, v/g)
“You Got to Move” (Reverend McKinley Peebles, v; Davis, v/g)
“Got on My Travelin’ Shoes” (Reverend McKinley Peebles, v; Davis, v/g)
Reverend McKinley Peebles: “He Never Has Left Me Alone” (Gary Davis, g)
Reverend McKinley Peebles: “Kicked Him Out of Heaven” (Gary Davis, g) (unissued)

26 November 1953, Paramount Hotel, Harlem, New York (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings SFWCD 40123, 2003):
“We Are the Heavenly Father’s Children”
“A Friend Like Lonely Jesus”
“If the Lord Be for You” (Annie Davis, 2d v)
“If I Had My Way”
“Shine on Me”
“There’s Destruction on This Land” (Annie Davis, 2d v)
“Marine Band”
“He Stole Away” (Reverend McKinley Peebles, v; Davis, v/g)
“When You First Said I Love You” (unissued)
“Down Upon the Sewanee River” (unissued)

April 1954, all with Sonny Terry, harmonica (Stinson LP 56 except ● Stinson LP 12; also issued on red vinyl, 1963; and as Collectables COL-CD-5607, 1995):
“I Can’t Make the Journey by Myself”
“Oh What a Beautiful City”
“Jesus Met the Woman at the Well”
“You Got to Move”
“Bad Company Brought Me Here”
“Motherless Children”
“Say No to the Devil”
“Death is Ridin’ Every Day” (a.k.a. “Sun Is Going Down”) ● “When the Train Comes Along

“Improvisation: Fast Blues in A”
“Improvisation: Slow Blues in E” (a.k.a. “Ice Pick Blues”)
“West Coast Blues”
“Improvisation: Rag in A Minor” (a.k.a. “Italian Rag”)
“Two-Step” (a.k.a. “Marine Band”)
“Horse Thief’s Blues”
“Candy Man”
“Improvisation: Hills and Valleys”
“Seven Sisters”
“Crucifixion”
“I Decided to Go Down”
“Sun Is Going Down”
“My Heart Is Fixed”
“Improvisation: Coco Blues”
*“My Home Is On High”* (Gary Davis, v only w/congregation and unidentified pn)


“Blow, Gabriel”
“Twelve Gates to the City”
“Samson and Delilah”
“Oh Lord, Search My Heart”
“Get Right Church”
“You Got to Go Down”
“Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning”
“There Was a Time When I Was Blind” (a.k.a. “Lord, I Wish I Could See”)


“Come Down to See Me Sometime”
“Lost John”
“Soldier’s Drill” (a.k.a. “Civil War March”)”
“Slow Blues in E”
“Mountain Jack”
“I Didn’t Want to Join the Band” (a.k.a. “Twelve Sticks”)

**June 1957** (Folklyric FL 125, 1957; Dobells 77 Records LA 12/14, 1965; Smithsonian Folkways SF 40035, 1991; ● also on Shout! Factory DK 30257, 2003):

“Pure Religion”
“Mountain Jack”
“Right Now”
“Buck Dance”
“Devil’s Dream”
“Moon Goes Down”
“Runnin’ to the Judgment”
“Hesitation Blues”
“I Didn’t Want to Join That Band”
“Evening Sun Goes Down”
“Seven Sisters”
“My Heart Is Fixed”
“Time Is Drawing Near”
“Crucifixion”
●“Bad Company”
●“Candy Man”
●“Cocaine Blues”

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*This hymn is part of a church service attended by Davis, who was also recorded offering up a prayer and giving a sermon – significant for being among two documented examples we have of Davis in this context, the other coming from Stefan Grossman (see below). An additional track on the record, a version of the hymn “Hold to God’s Unchanging Hand,” which Davis did from time to time on harmonica, is performed by the congregation without Davis, and thus is not listed as part of his discography here.*
“If I Had My Way”

1958/59, private recordings made at Columbia University (Shanachie 6117, 2001)\(^\text{10}\):
“Buck Dance”
“Soldier’s March”
“Baby, What You Going to Do”
“Twelve Sticks” (The Dozens)
“Save Up Your Money, John D. Rockefeller Put the Panic On”
“I Am the Light of This World”
“Nobody Cares for Me”
“Slippin’ Till My Gal Comes In Partner”
“Blues”
“Crucifixion”
“Rag Blues in C”
“Blues in E”
“Square Dance Verses”
“Don’t Know Where to Go”
“He’s My King”
“I’m Throwin’ Up My Hands (Ain’t Gonna Work No More)”
“Cross and Evil Woman Blues”
“Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning”
“I’m So Tired of Being All Alone”

11-12 July 1959, live at Newport Folk Festival (Vanguard LP 9145; Fontana LP TFL 6037)\(^\text{11}\):
“Samson and Delilah”
“You Got to Move”

24 August 1960, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. (Prestige Bluesville 1015, 1960; Fontana 688303ZL; Prestige LP 14028; Prestige/Bluesville OBCCD-547-2, 1992; Fantasy 24704, 1972; ● also on Shout! Factory DK 30257):
“Let Us Get Together Right Down Here”
“I Belong to the Band”
“Pure Religion”
“Great Change Since I Been Born”
“Goin’ to Sit Down on the Banks of the River”
“Tryin’ to Get Home”
“Lo, I Be with You Always”

\(^{10}\) Though Fancourt and McGrath’s *The Blues Discography*, 118, lists the Columbia recordings as being live, Hayes and Laughton’s *The Gospel Discography*, 80, identifies the same sessions as privately recorded. Stefan Grossman, who released this material, confirms that the performances, which took place in an auditorium (sans audience), were privately documented by John Gibbon, one of Davis’s earliest folk revival students; correspondence with Stefan Grossman, 24 September 2009.

\(^{11}\) Released in 1964 on the compilation, *Blues at Newport, 1963*, the Davis tracks were actually recorded at the inaugural festival in 1959.
“I Am the Light of This World”
“Lord, I Feel Just Like Goin’ On”
● “Samson and Delilah”
● “Death Don’t Have No Mercy”
● “Twelve Gates to the City”
“The Sun Going Down” (unissued)
“Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning” (unissued)
“You Got to Go Down” (unissued)
“By and By I’m Going to See the King” (unissued)
“I Know I Have Another Building” (unissued)
“Earth Have No Sorrow” (unissued)
“Joy to Know Him” (unissued)
“Don’t Move My Bed Till the Holy Ghost Come” (unissued)

1961, Hackensack, N.J.; #Davis, harmonica (Bluesville BVLP 1049; XTRA 5014, 1966; Prestige/Bluesville OBCCD-519-2, 1990):
“Say No to the Devil”
“Time Is Drawing Near”
#“Hold to God’s Unchanging Hand”
“Bad Company Brought Me Here”
“I Decided to Go Down”
“Lord, I Looked Down the Road”
“Little Bitty Baby”
#“No One Can Do Me like Jesus”
“Lost Boy in the Wilderness”
“Trying to Get to Heaven in Due Time”

“I’m Glad I’m in That Number”
“There’s a Table Sittin’ in Heaven”
“Motherless Children”
“There’s a Bright Side Somewhere”
“I’ll Be All Right Some Day”
“You Better Mind”
“A Little More Faith”
“I’ll Fly Away”
“God’s Gonna Separate”
“When I Die I’ll Live Again”
● “You Got to Move”
● “Crucifixion”

1962, live at Swarthmore College, Penn. (Transatlantic TRA 249, 1971; Kicking Mule KM 101, 1974; Heritage HT 308, 1985; Heritage HT CD 02, 1989; ● also on Shanachie 6117, 2001; ■ also on Shanachie 97024, 1993):
“Come Down and See Me Sometime”  
“Soldier’s Drill”  
• “I’m Going to Sit Down on the Banks of the River”  
• “Twelve Gates to the City”  
• “(I Heard the) Angels Singing”  
• “Long Way to Tipperary”  
• “When the Train Comes Along (Meet You at the Station)”  
• ■ “Twelve Sticks”  
■ “Buck Dance”


“You Got to Move”  
“Come Down and See Me Sometime”  
“Wouldn’t Say Quit”  
“People That Use to See Can’t See No More”  
“There’s Destruction in This Land”  
“Just a Closer Walk with Thee”  
“Death Don’t Have No Mercy”  
“Lord I Won’t Go Back in Sin”  
“Candyman”  
“Buck Dance”  
“Samson and Delilah”  
“Working on the Building”  
“I’ll Fly Away”  
“Sun Goin’ Down”  
#“Fox Chase”  
“Lord Search My Heart”  
“Jesus Met the Woman at the Well”  
“Say No to the Devil”  
“I Am a Pilgrim”  
“All Night Long”  
“Trying to Get to Heaven”  
“Thank You Jesus”  
“Twelve Sticks”  
“Lord They Tell Me”  
#“Right or Wrong”  
▲ “Tesse”

12Previous to its inclusion on Gerde’s, the song was available on the cassette version of I Am a True Vine only.
“Oh Glory, How Happy I Am”
“Soon My Work Will All Be Done”
“God’s Gonna Separate”
“I Want to Be Saved”
“Candyman”
“Babylon Is Falling”

●* Suzie Dews: “What Could I Do” (Gary Davis, g) 
* Suzie Dews: “Lord Let Me Live Longer” (Gary Davis, g)
* Suzie Dews: “I’m Goin’ Back to Jesus” (Gary Davis, g)
● “Lo I Be with You Always”
● “Children of Zion”
●▲* “Whoopin’ Blues”
▲ “Wall Hollow Blues”
▲ “Blow Gabriel”
▲ “Get Right Church”
▲ □ “Slippin' Til My Gal Comes in Partner”
▲ “Blues in E”
▲ ▲ “Piece without Words”
▲ “Cocaine Blues”
▲* “Candyman”

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13 The liner notes to Lo’, I Be with You Always indicate this version of “Candyman” was recorded 7 February 1963 at Gerde’s. However, in light of the recent three-CD set of Davis recorded live at Gerde’s 3-10 February 1962, and given the performance similarities of both (down to a syncopated bass run that concludes each version), it is safe to assume this rendition came from the same week of dates Grossman recorded in 1962.

14 Listed as “Fox Chase” on Let Us Get Together and as having been recorded at Gerde’s in 1963.

15 The singer, who has been identified variously as Suzy, Suzzy, Suzze, or Suzie with no last name, is listed as Suzie Dews in a New York Times review of a concert Davis gave at the McBurrey (sic, McBurney) Young Men’s Christian Association on which he was joined by Reverend McKinley Peebles and Ms. Dews; Mike Jahn, “Davis Guitar Style Shapes ‘Roots’ Show, New York Times, 9 November 1970, p. 56.

16 On Heritage HT 307, the introduction of the performance has been edited.

17 On Adelphi Records 1008/GENES GCD 9908, the same performance is titled “Slippin’ Till My Gal Get In” and identified as having been recorded in 1965.

18 On the cassette, not CD, version of I Am a True Vine.

19 On the cassette, not CD, version of I Am a True Vine.
1962, live at Chicago Folk Festival (Wolf Record 120.915, 1988):
“Death Don’t Have No Mercy”
“Soon My Work Will Be Done”
“You Got to Move”
“If I Had My Way”
“Just a Closer Walk with Thee”
“He Knows How Much We Can Bear”

22-23 June 1962, live at The Sign of the Sun, San Diego, #Davis, banjo-guitar; ^Davis, banjo (Heritage HT CD 03, 1990):
“Sun Is Going Down”
“I’m Gonna Meet You at the Station”
“If I Had My Way”
“Twelve Gates to the City”
“God’s Gonna Separate the Wheat from the Tares”
“Get Right Church”
“When the Saints Go Marching In”
“God Don’t Work Like a Natural Man”
“Soon My Work Will All Be Done”
“I’ll Be Alright”
#“Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning”
“There’s Destruction in This Land”
“Death Don’t Have No Mercy”
“Near the Cross”
“Old Drunken Sally”
^“Kitty Went a-Courting”

“If I Had My Way”
“Sally, Where’d You Get Your Liquor From”
“You Got to Move”

1962/63 (Babylon Is Falling, Stefan Grossman’s Guitar Workshop Inc. Limited Edition Cassettes, n.n., 1984; ● also on Stefan Grossman’s Guitar Workshop 130/1/2, 2010; ■ also on Shanachie 6117, 2001):
● “Don’t Let My Baby Catch You Here”
■“Virgin Mary”
■“Bill Bailey”
■“Honey, Get Your Towel Wet”
■“She Wouldn’t Say Quit”20

20 This aural performance of “She Wouldn’t Say Quit” is the same as the video filmed in July 1967 by the Seattle Folklore Society. The latter date, then, is certainly the correct one.

“All Night Long”
“Who Shall Deliver Poor Me”
“Jesus Met the Woman at the Well”
“Lord, Search My Heart”
“Lord, On Your Word”
“Let Us Get Together”
“Sun Is Going Down”
“Spoonful”
“Devil’s Dream”
“Blow Gabriel”
●“Little Boy, Little Boy Who Made Your Britches”
●“Cocaine Blues”
●“Whistlin’ Blues”


“Twelve Sticks”
“Sally, Where’d You Get Your Liquor From”
“Children of Zion”
“Hesitation Blues”
^“Candyman”
“Steal Away and Pray”
“Goin’ to Chattanooga”
“Packing Up, Get Ready to Go”
#Untitled21
“You Cry Because I’m Leaving”
^“I Want to Be Saved”
●“Waltz Time Candyman”
“Little Boy Who Made Your Britches”
●“Two Step Candyman”
■“C-Rag”
“C-Rag” (second take)
“Lord Search My Heart”
“Sun Is Going Down”
“Raise a Ruckus Tonight”
“Save Up Your Money, John D. Rockefeller Put the Panic On”
“Soon My Work Will All Be Done” (Annie Davis, 2d v)
^K“You’re Gonna Need King Jesus”

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21This is a banjo-guitar performance of Blind Boy Fuller’s “(I Got a Woman Crazy for Me) She’s Funny That Way.”
“Blues in C”
“Saddle It Around”
▲ “People Who Use to See”
● “Italian Rag”
“Nobody Don’t Care for Me”
* “Fox Chase”

1962/67 church service, New York City; Davis, v/g w/congregation (Stefan Grossman’s Guitar Workshop 130/1/2, 2010):
“Amazing Grace”
“Lord, I Feel Just Like Goin’ On”
“Steal Away”
“Calvary”
“The Day Is Past and Gone” (Gary Davis, v only w/congregation)
“Can’t Make This Journey By Myself”
“I Will Overcome Someday” (Gary Davis, v only w/unidentified pn)
“God Be with You”

# “West Coast Blues”
“St. Louis Tickle”
“Make Believe Stunt”
■ “Cincinnati Flow Rag”
■ “Buck Rag”
■ “Walkin’ Dog Blues”
▲ “Dark Town Strutters’ Ball”
▲ “Swingin’ Blues”

“I Am a True Vine”
“Lord Stand By Me”
“Won’t You Hush”
“Mean Old World”
“Moon Is Going Down”
“Sportin’ Life Blues”


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22 Unidentified on the disc, this hymn follows “Steal Away” within the same track.

23 Also unidentified on the disc, Davis leads the congregation in an a cappella version of this hymn following a brief sermon.
“Blues in A”
● Suzie Dews: “Tired, My Soul Needs a Restin’” (Gary Davis, g)
● “Georgia Camp Meeting”
● ▲ “You’re Goin’ Quit Me Baby”

1963-1964 (Kicking Mule/Sonet SNKF 103, 1974; ● also on Shanachie 6117, 2001;
▲ also on Adelphi Records 1008, 1973/GENES GCD 9908, 1996):
“Cocaine Blues”
“Death Don't Have No Mercy”
● “Oh Glory, How Happy I Am”
▲ “Let Us Get Together”

“There’s Destruction in That Land”

1964 (XTRA LP 1009):
“I’m on My Way to the Kingdom”
“He Knows Just How Much We Can Bear”
“Lord I’ll Be with You Always”
“Yeah! (Time Is Drawing Near)”

1964, live at Mariposa Folk Festival, Toronto, Canada; w/Georgia Sea Island Singers (Kicking Mule SNKD1, 1973):
“I Got Religion I’m So Glad”
“I’m a Soldier in the Army of the Lord”

January 1964, live at Allegheny College, Meadeville, Penn., ^Davis, banjo; #Davis, harmonica (● Wolf Records RO 915, 1988; ▲ Document DLP 527):
● “Samson and Delilah”
● “Instrumental March”
● “Old Time Religion”
● “I Heard the Angels Singing”
● # “God’s Unchanging Hand”
● “Trying to Get Home”
▲ “I Know You’ll Miss Me When I’m Gone”
▲ “Cincinnati Slow Drag”
▲ # “Harmonica Solo”
▲ “Candyman”
▲ ^ “Banjo Instrumental I”
▲ ^ “Banjo Instrumental II”
▲ “Maple Leaf Rag”
▲ ^ “I Know You’ll Miss Me When I’m Gone”
▲ “Guitar Blues”

681
“Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning”
“You Got to Move”
“Let Us Get Together”
“Samson and Delilah”

“Maple Leaf Rag”
“Slow Drag”
“The Boy Was Kissing the Girl”
“Candy Man”
“United States March”
#“Devil’s Dream”
^“The Coon Hunt”
“Mister Jim”
#“Please Baby”
“Fast Fox Trot”
●“Can’t Be Satisfied”

April/May 1964. Live in Europe, * w/Sonny Terry (LRC Ltd. n.n., 2008; ● also on Groove Jams GJ97006, 1998):24
“Little Ragtime” [“Cincinnati Flow Rag”]
“Maple Leaf Rag”
“Pickin’ Rag” [“Buck Rag”]
●“Lord Search My Heart” [“I Told Jesus I’d Bear My Burden If He’d Write My Name”]
●*“Sonny Go Down” [“Sun Is Going Down”]
●*“Right Now” [“Great Change Since I’ve Been Born”]
●“You Got to Go Down” [“Tell Me John”25]
●“Let Us Get Together” [“Samson and Delilah”]

8 May 1964. Live at Free Trade Hall, Manchester, England; #Davis, harmonica (Document DOCD 32-20-14, 2007):
“You Got to Move”
“If I Had My Way”
“The Sun Is Going Down”
“I’m a Soldier”

24 These performances are certainly from the American Folk Blues and Gospel Caravan tour of Britain, on which Davis and Terry both played, and very well may have come from the Hammersmith Odeon concert, which was praised for the duets given by Davis and Terry; see John Cowley, record review of I Am the True Vine, by Reverend Gary Davis, Juke Blues 1 (July 1985): 29.

25 Clearly not the song “You Got to Go Down,” this seeming variant of “John the Revelator” by Davis – of which we have no additional extant performance – has been identified in title by its opening vocal line.
“I Got A Little Mama, Sweet As She Can Be”
“Sally, Please Come Back To Me (Worried Blues)”
“Cocaine Blues”
“Cincinnati Flow Rag”
“Children of Zion”
#“Coon Hunt”
“Maple Leaf Rag”

**July 1965.** live at Newport Folk Festival, #Davis, harmonica (Vanguard 73008-2, 1967;
● bonus tracks on Vanguard 79588-2, 2001):
“Samson & Delilah”
“I Won’t Be Back No More”
“Buck Dance”
“Twelve Sticks”
“Death Don’t Have No Mercy”
“You Got to Move”
“Lovin’ Spoonful”
“She Wouldn’t Say Quit”
#“I’ve Done All My Singing for My Lord”
“Twelve Gates to the City”
“I Will Do My Last Singing in This Land Somewhere”
●“Soldiers Drill”
●“Get Along Cindy” (w/Barry Kornfeld, v/b)

**1966.** #Davis, harmonica (Folkways Records FS 3542, 1976): ● also on Adelphi Records
“Oh, What a Beautiful City”
“Fast Stepping Time”
#“Long John”
#“God’s Unchanging Hand”
“We Are the Heavenly Father’s Children”
●“Sun Is Going Down”
●“Morning Train”
●#“Birdshead Special”26

**1966.** Toronto (Document Records DLP 521, 1988):
“Slow Blues”
“Right Now”
“Instrumental Guitar Rag”
“Candy Man No. 1”
“Instrumental Rag”
“Fast Blues”
“Candy Man No. 2”
“Maple Leaf Rag”
“Christ Is a Friend (O My Lord)”

26Titled “Birmingham Special” on the Adelphi/GENES release.
“Instrumental (Untitled)”
“Untitled Rag”
“When the Evening Sun Goes Down”
“Stovepipe Stomp”
“She Just Put It That Way”
“Guitar and Banjo Duet”
“If I Had My Way”

27 January 1967, live in Montreal, #Davis, harmonica (Just a Memory CD 9133):
“Samson and Delilah”
“Twelve Gates to the City”
“Mind How You’re Living”
“You Got to Move”
“How Much We Can Bear”
“I Will Do My Last Singing”
“Make Believe Stunt”
“Maple Leaf Rag”
#“Coon Chase”
“Buck Dance”

1968, live at Harvard, Cambridge, Mass., #Davis, harmonica (Fontana SFJL 914):
“Twelve Gates to the City”
“Samson and Delilah”
“Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning”
“The Boy Was Kissing the Girl (And Playing the Guitar at the Same Time)”
#“Birmingham Special”
#“Time Ain’t So Long”
“Silvie”
#“Lost John”
“Lo I’ll Be With You Always”

1968, live at Michigan State, Ann Arbor, #Davis, banjo-guitar (Kicking Mule/Sonet SNKD1, 1973; ● also on Shanachie 97024, 1993):
“Please Judy”
“The Boy Was Kissing the Girl”
●#“She’s Funny That Way”
●“Baby, Let Me Lay It On You”
●“Hesitation Blues”

March 1969, #Davis, banjo; #Davis, piano (Adelphi Records 1008, 1973; GENES GCD 9908, 1996; ▲also on on Shout! Factory DK 30257):
“Lo, I’ll Be With You Always”
#“God Will Take Care of You”
“Right Now”
“O, Glory”
▲#“Out on the Ocean Sailing”
▲“Soon My Work Will All Be Done”

12 August 1970, live at Bucks Rock Summer Camp, New Milford, Conn. (American Activities UACD 103; ● unissued):
“Samson and Delilah”
“Let Us Get Together”
“She’s Funny That Way”
“Cincinnati Flow Rag”
“Sally”
“CC Rider”
“Make Believe Stunt”
“Delia”
“Candy Man”
●“Come Down to See Me Sometime”
●“She Wouldn’t Say Quit”
●“Buck Dance”

17 March 1971, #Davis, harmonica (- Biograph BLP-12030, 1971; Biograph BLP-12034; * Biograph BCD 123, 1992; ● Biograph/Shout! Factory DK 34007, 2004; ¶ on Biograph CD 113; ▲ on Shout! Factory DK 30257):
- ¶“Hesitation Blues”
- ¶ ▲“Whistling Blues”
- ¶ ▲“How Happy I Am”
- ¶“Soon My Work Will Be Done”
- * ●“Talk on the Corner”
- * ●“Sally, Where’d You Get Your Whiskey From?”
- * ●#“Lost John”
- * ●“Samson and Delilah”
- * ●“I Heard the Angels Singing”
- * ●“Children of Zion”
- * ●“You Better Get Right”
- * ● ▲“Lord I Wish I Could See”
- * ●“Down by the River”
- * ●“Eagle Rocking Blues”
- * ●“Crow Jane”
- * ●“Cocaine Blues”
- * ●“I’ll Do My Last Singing”
“Be Mindful of Your Sacrament”
¶“Candy Man”

“Let Us Get Together”
“There’s Destruction in This Land”

27 Unissued tracks on Gary Davis at Buck’s Rock, 8-12-70 (FT-4696 LC) from the “Bob Carlin Collection 1824-2003” (call #20050), Southern Folklife Collection, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
“Samson and Delilah”
“You Got to Move”
“Pure Religion”

“Pure Religion”
“Mountain Jack”
“Cincinnati Flow Rag”
“Mama Let Me Lay It on You”
“I Am a True Vine”
“Candy Man”
“Buck Dance”
“Walkin’ Dog Blues (Happy Blues)”
“I Hear the Angels Sing”
“Whistlin’ Blues”
APPENDIX 3: REVEREND GARY DAVIS COMMERCIAL RECORD DISCOGRAPHY

Reverend Gary Davis on 78 (1935-1949)

23-26 July 1935: the American Record Company issued seven 78s as “Blind Gary”:
1. “I’m Throwing Up My Hands (Ain’t Gonna Work Here No More)”/ “Cross and Evil Woman Blues” (ARC 35-10-16)
2. “I Am the True Vine”/“I Am the Light of the World” (ARC 5-12-66)
3. “O Lord, Search My Heart”/“You Got to Go Down” (ARC 35-10-33)
4. “You Can Go Home”/“Twelve Gates to the City” (ARC 7-04-55)
5. “Lord, Stand By Me”/Bull City Red: “I Saw the Light” (ARC 6-05-65)
6. “I Belong to the Band – Hallelujah!”/“The Great Change in Me” (ARC 6-02-65)
7. “Have More Faith in Jesus”/“The Angel’s Message to Me” (ARC 6-11-63)

1949: Lenox 520
“I Cannot Bear My Burden By Myself”
“I’m Gonna Meet You at the Station”

NOTE: Not including individual tracks on compilations, there have been at least seven reissues between 1966 and 2006 of Gary Davis’s pre-war material. These reissues (most packaged and repackaged by Yazoo in the United States and Document in Europe for the LP and digital eras) include:

c. 1966: “I Saw the Light”/Lord Stand By Me” (side A) w/”The Angels’ Message to Me”/“Have More Faith in Jesus” (side B) (Pirate Records MPC 526, Stockholm, Sweden)

1970: Reverend Gary Davis 1935-1949 (Yazoo L-1023)


1994: Meet You at the Station: The Vintage Recordings 1935-1949 (DOCD-5060)


1Though this discography overlaps to a degree with my Davis sessionography, it nonetheless looks at Davis’s recorded output from a different perspective, namely when and how the music he recorded has been compiled, released, and re-released for public consumption. For example, though Davis debuted his “Civil War March” on record in 1945 for Moses Asch, the well-known staple got its official release on Prestige in 1964, three years before Asch got around to releasing his own sound recording of the tune). This list also gives a good picture of how Davis’s music has proliferated on anthologies and compilations over the years, indicating an influence beyond the mere chronology of recorded dates in a typical discography. Since Davis was identified at various points in his career as Blind Gary, Blind Gary Davis, Gary Davis, Reverend Gary Davis, or Rev. Gary Davis, his name is listed as it appeared on original record releases. No identification is given when Davis’s name is used as part of the album title. Song titles are also listed as they appear on record. In the few cases where a song is misidentified, the correct title follows in brackets (alternate titles, on the other hand, are listed in the song appendix). Two dates joined by a slash indicate a subsequent reissue of a title by the same label with little or no difference in packaging of the material.


Reverend Gary Davis on LP and CD (1954-present)


“I Can’t Make the Journey by Myself”
“Oh What a Beautiful City”
“Jesus Met the Woman at the Well”
“You Got to Move”
“Bad Company Brought Me Here”
“Motherless Children”
“Say No to the Devil”
“Death is Riding Everyday”


“Blow, Gabriel”
“Twelve Gates to the City”
“Samson and Delilah”
“Oh Lord, Search My Heart”
“Get Right Church”
“You Got to Go Down”
“Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning”
“There Was a Time When I Was Blind”


“Pure Religion”
“Mountain Jack”
“Right Now”
“Buck Dance”
“Candy Man”
“Devil’s Dream”
“Moon Goes Down”
“Cocaine Blues”
“Runnin’ to the Judgment”
“Hesitation Blues”
“Bad Company”
“I Didn’t Want to Join That Band”
“Evening Sun Goes Down”
“Seven Sisters”
“My Heart Is Fixed”
“Time Is Drawing Near”
“Crucifixion”

1960: Blind Gary Davis, **Harlem Street Singer** (Prestige Bluesville 1015, 1960; Fontana 688303ZL; Prestige LP 14028; Prestige/Bluesville OBCCD-547-2, 1992):
“Samson and Delilah”
“Let Us Get Together Right Down Here”
“I Belong to the Band”
“Pure Religion”
“Great Change Since I Been Born”
“Death Don’t Have No Mercy”
“Twelve Gates to the City”
“Goin’ to Sit Down on the Banks of the River”
“Tryin’ to Get Home”
“Lo, I Be with You Always”
“I Am the Light of This World”
“Lord, I Feel Just Like Goin’ On”

1961: Reverend Gary Davis, **Say No to the Devil** (Bluesville BVLP 1049; Prestige/Bluesville OBCCD-519-2, 1990)
“Say No to the Devil”
“Time Is Drawing Near”
“Hold to God’s Unchanging Hand”
“Bad Company Brought Me Here”
“I Decided to Go Down”
“Lord, I Looked Down the Road”
“Little Bitty Baby”
“No One Can Do Me Like Jesus”
“Lost Boy in the Wilderness”
“Trying to Get to Heaven in Due Time”

1961: Reverend Gary Davis, **A Little More Faith** (Bluesville BV-1032; Prestige/Bluesville OBCCD-588-2, 1990/1999)
“You Got to Move”
“Crucifixion”
“I’m Glad I’m in That Number”
“There’s a Table Sittin’ in Heaven”
“Motherless Children”
“There’s a Bright Side Somewhere”
“I’ll Be All Right Some Day”
“You Better Mind”
“A Little More Faith”
“I’ll Fly Away”
“God’s Gonna Separate”
“When I Die I’ll Live Again”

1964: **Rev. Gary Davis/Short Stuff Macon** (Folkways/XTRA 1009)
“I’m on My Way to the Kingdom”
“He Knows Just How Much We Can Bear”
“Lord I’ll Be with You Always”
“Yeah! (Time Is Drawing Near)”

1964: Reverend Gary Davis, **The Guitar & Banjo of Reverend Gary Davis**
“Maple Leaf Rag”
“Slow Drag aka Cincinnati Flow Rag”
“The Boy Was Kissing the Girl “
“Candy Man “
“United States March aka Soldier’s Drill”
“Devil's Dream”
“The Coon Hunt”
“Mister Jim aka Walkin’ Dog Blues”
“Please Baby”
“Fast Fox Trot aka Buck Rag”
“Can't Be Satisfied”

1967: Reverend Gary Davis, **At Newport** (Vanguard 73008-2; reissued as Live at Newport, Vanguard 79588-2, 2001, ● bonus tracks on CD reissue only)
“Samson & Delilah (If I Had My Way)”
“I Won’t Be Back No More”
“Buck Dance”
“Twelve Sticks”
“Death Don’t Have No Mercy”
“You Got to Move”
“Lavin’ Spoonful”
“She Wouldn’t Say Quit”
“I’ve Done All My Singing for My Lord”
“Twelve Gates to the City”
“I Will Do My Last Singing in This Land Somewhere”
● “Soldiers Drill”
● “Get Along Cindy”

1968: The Reverend Gary Davis, **Bring Your Money, Honey!** (Fontana SFJL 914)
“Twelve Gates to the City”
“Samson and Delilah (If I Had My Way)”
“Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning”
“The Boy Was Kissing the Girl (And Playing the Guitar at the Same Time)”
“Birmingham Special”
“Time Ain’t So Long”
“Silvie”
“Lost John”
“Lo, I’ll Be With You Always”

1971: Reverend Gary Davis, **Children of Zion: In Concert** (Transatlantic TRA 249; Kicking Mule KM 101, 1974; Heritage HT 308, 1985)
“‘I’m Going to Sit Down on the Banks of the River”
“Twelve Gates to the City”
“(I Heard the) Angels Singing”
“Twelve Sticks”
“Long Way to Tipperary”
“When the Train Comes Along (Meet You at the Station)”
“Come Down and See Me Sometime”
“Buck Dance”
“Soldier’s Drill”

1971: Rev. Gary Davis, **Ragtime Guitar** (Transatlantic TRA 244; Kicking Mule KM 106, 1974; Heritage HT 309, 1985)
“Cincinnati Flow Rag”
“West Coast Blues”
“Buck Rag”
“St. Louis Tickle”
“Two Step Candyman”
“Walkin’ Dog Blues”
“Italian Rag”
“C-Rag”
“Waltz Time Candyman”
“Make Believe Stunt”

1971: Reverend Gary Davis, **New Blues & Gospel: 1971 Vol. 1** (Biograph BLP-12030)
“How Happy I Am”
“I Heard the Angels Singing”
“Samson and Delilah”
“Children of Zion”
“Soon My Work Will All Be Done”
“Talk on the Corner”
“Sally, Where’d You Get Your Whiskey”
“Hesitation Blues”
“Whistlin’ Blues”
“Lost John”
1971: The Legendary Reverend Gary Davis, 1971: Blues and Gospel\(^2\) (Biograph BLP-12034)

“You Better Get Right”
“Lord I Wish I Could See”
“Be Mindful of Your Sacrament”
“Down By the River”
“Eagle Rocking Blues”
“Candy Man”
“Crow Jane”
“Cocaine Blues”
“I’ll Do My Last Singing”

1972: Gary Davis, When I Die I’ll Live Again\(^3\) (Fantasy 24704)

1973: Rev. Gary Davis, Lo’ I’ll Be With You Always (Kicking Mule/Sonet SKND 1)

“She’s Funny That Way”
“Baby, Let Me Lay It on You”
“Please Judy”
“The Boy was Kissing the Girl …”
“Hesitation Blues”
“Candyman”
“I Got Religion, I’m So Glad”
“I’m a Soldier in the Army of the Lord”
“Children of Zion”
“Whoopin’ Blues”
“What Could I Do”
“Lo’ I Be with You Always”


“Let’s Get Together”
“Sun Goin’ Down”
“Slippin’ Til’ My Gal Get In”
“Lo, I’ll Be with You Always”
“God Will Take Care of You”
“Mornin’ Train”
“Out on the Ocean Sailing”
“Right Now”
“Birmingham Special”
“There’s Destruction in That Land”
“O, Glory”

\(^2\)This is actually a second volume of material from the same Biograph session as New Blues & Gospel. The second album’s back jacket is more accurately titled Vol. 2 – 1972: Lord I Wish I Could See.

\(^3\)This is a double LP packaging of Harlem Street Singer (Prestige/Bluesville BV-1015) and A Little More Faith (Prestige/Bluesville BV-1032).
“Soon My Work Will All Be Done”

1974: Rev. Gary Davis, Let Us Get Together (Sonet/Kicking Mule LP SNKF 103)
“Oh Glory, How Happy I Am”
“Cocaine Blues”
“Death Don’t Have No Mercy”
“Let Us Get Together”
“There’s Destruction in That Land”
“Tired, My Soul Needs a Restin’”
“Georgia Camp Meeting”
“Blues in A”
“Fox Chase”
“You’re Goin’ Quit Me Baby”

1976: Rev. Gary Davis, Sun is Going Down (Folkways 3542)
“Sun is Going Down”
“Oh What a Beautiful City (Twelve Gates to the City)”
“Morning Train”
“Fast Stepping Time”
“Birdshead Special”
“Long John”
“God’s Unchanging Hand”
“We Are the Heavenly Father’s Children”

“Little Boy, Little Boy, Who Made Your Britches?”
“All Night Long”
“Paul and Silas”
“Jesus Met the Woman at the Well”
“Lord, Search My Heart”
“Lord, On Your Word”
“Let Us Get Together”
“Cocaine Blues”
“Devil’s Dream”
“Blow Gabriel”
“Sun is Golin’ Down”
“When the Train Comes Along”
“Spoonful”
“Whistlin’ Blues”
“Bill Bailey”
“Honey, Get Your Towel Wet”
“She Wouldn’t Say Quit”
“You’re Goin’ to Quit Me, Baby”
“Don’t Let My Baby Catch You Here”
“Virgin Mary”
“People Who Used to See, Can’t See No More”
“Babylon Is Falling”

“Am a True Vine”
“Lord, Stand by Me”
“Won’t You Hush”
“Mean Old World”
“Moon Is Goin’ Down”
“Sportin’ Life Blues”
“Tesse”
“God’s Gonna Separate”
“Soon My Work Will All Be Done”
“Oh Glory, How Happy I Am”
“Blow Gabriel!”
“Slippin’ ’Til My Gal Comes In, Partner”
“Cocaine Blues”
“Candyman”
“Wall Hollow Blues”
“Blues in E”
“Piece without Words”
Talk on the Death of Blind Boy Fuller
“Whoopin’ Blues”
“Get Right Church”
“I Want to Be Saved”

“Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning”
“You Got to Move”
“Let Us Get Together”
“Samson and Delilah”

1985: Rev. Gary Davis, **I Am a True Vine** (Heritage HT 307)
“I Am a True Vine”
“Lord, Stand by Me”
“Won’t You Hush”
“Mean Old World”
“Moon Is Going Down”
“Sportin’ Life Blues”
“Get Right Church”
“Blow Gabriel!”
“Slippin’ ’Til My Gal Comes In, Partner”

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*This is a British LP reissue of the 1984 Grossman cassette of the same name sans seven tracks.*
“Wall Hollow Blues”
“Blues in E”
“Piece without Words”
“Whoopin’ Blues”
“I Want to Be Saved”

1988: **Blind Gary Davis** (Document DLP 521)
“Slow Blues” [“Mountain Jack”]
“Right Now”
“Instrumental Guitar Rag” [“Buck Dance”]
“Candy Man No. 1”
“Instrumental Rag” [“Devil’s Dream”]
“Fast Blues” [“Hesitation Blues”]
“Candy Man No. 2”
“Maple Leaf Rag”
“Christ Is a Friend (O My Lord)” [“Moon Is Going Down”]
“Instrumental (Untitled)” [“Cocaine”]
“Untitled Rag” [“Twelve Sticks”]
“When the Evening Sun Goes Down”
“Stovepipe Stomp” [“Cincinnati Flow Rag”]
“She Just Put It That Way”
“Guitar and Banjo Duet” [“Soldier’s Joy”]
“If I Had My Way”

1988: Blind Gary Davis **At Allegheny College, Meadville, Pa., 1964: Afternoon Workshop** (Document DLP 527)
“Cincinnati Slow Drag”
“Harmonica Solo”
“Candyman”
“Banjo Instrumental I”
“Maple Leaf Rag”
“I Know You’ll Miss Me When I’m Gone”
“Guitar Blues”
“Banjo Instrumental II”

1988: Blind Gary Davis, **1962-1964: Recorded Live** (Wolf Records RO 120.915)
“Death Don’t Have No Mercy”
“Soon My Work Will All Be Done”
“You Got to Move”
“If I Had My Way”
“Just a Closer Walk with Thee”
“He Knows How Much We Can Bear”
“Samson and Delilah”

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5The inside label reads: At “Al Matthes”, Toronto (Spring 1976) [sic, recorded in 1966].
“Instrumental March” [“Marine Band”]
“Old Time Religion”
“I Heard the Angels Singing”
“God’s Unchanging Hand”
“Trying to Get Home”

1989: Reverend Gary Davis (Heritage HT CD 02)⁶
“I’m Going to Sit Down on the Banks of the River”
“Twelve Gates to the City”
“(I Heard the) Angels Singing”
“It’s a Long Way to Tipperary”
“I’ll Meet You at the Station When the Train Comes Along”
“Come Down and Meet Me Sometime”
“Buck Dance”
“Soldier’s Drill”
“Cincinnati Flow Rag”
“West Coast Blues”
“Buck Rag”
“St. Louis Tickle”
“Two Step Candyman”
“Walkin’ Dog Blues”
“Italian Rag”
“C-Rag”
“Waltz Time Candyman”
“Make Believe Stunt”

1990: Reverend Gary Davis, At the Sign of the Sun – 1962 (Heritage HT CD 03)
“Sun Is Going Down”
“I’m Gonna Meet You at the Station”
“If I Had My Way”
“Twelve Gates to the City”
“God’s Gonna Separate the Wheat from the Tares”
“Get Right Church”
“When the Saints Go Marching In”
“God Don’t Work Like a Natural Man”
“Soon My Work Will All Be Done”
“I’ll Be Alright”
“Old Drunken Sally”
“Kitty Went a-Courting”
“Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning”
“There’s Destruction in This Land”
“Death Don’t Have No Mercy”
“Near the Cross”

⁶This record combines Children of Zion (Kicking Mule KM 101) and Ragtime Guitar (Kicking Mule 106).
1991: Reverend Gary Davis, **Delia – Late Concert Recordings 1970-1971** (American Activities 103)

“She’s Funny That Way”
“Cincinnati Flow Rag”
“Sally”
“CC Rider”
“Make Believe Stunt”
“Delia”
“Candy Man”
“Samson and Delilah”
“Let Us Get Together”
“Pure Religion”
“Mountain Jack”
“Cincinnati Flow Rag (Version 2)”
“Mama Let Me Lay It on You”
“I Am a True Vine”
“Candy Man (Version 2)”
“Buck Dance”
“Walkin’ Dog Blues (Happy Blues)”
“I Hear the Angels Sing”
“Whistlin’ Blues”

1993: Rev. Gary Davis, **Blues & Ragtime** (Shanachie 97024)

“Walkin’ Dog Blues”
“Cincinnati Flow Rag”
“She’s Funny That Way”
“Whoopin’ Blues”
“Twelve Sticks”
“Children of Zion”
“Buck Rag”
“Hesitation Blues”
“C-Rag”
“Baby, Let Me Lay It on You”
“Cocaine Blues”
“Buck Dance”
“Candyman”
“Wall Hollow Blues”
“Little Boy, Little Boy Who Made Your Britches”
“Whistlin’ Blues”

1997: Reverend Gary Davis, **Live & Kickin’** (Justin Time Records/Just a Memory JAM 9133-2)

“Make Believe Stunt” [“Cincinnati Flow Rag”]
“Maple Leaf Rag”
“Coon Chase”
“Samson and Delilah”
“Twelve Gates to the City”
“Mind How You’re Living”
“You Got to Move”
“How Much We Can Bear”
“I Will Do My Last Singing”
“Buck Dance”

1999: Reverend Gary Davis. **Live at Cambridge 1971** (Catfish KATCD115)
“Let Us Get Together”
“There’s Destruction in This Land”
“Samson and Delilah”
“You Got to Move”
“Pure Religion”

2001: Rev. Gary Davis, **Demons and Angels: The Ultimate Collection** (Shanachie 6117)
“Buck Dance”
“Soldier’s March”
“Baby, What You Going to Do”
“Twelve Sticks (The Dozens)”
“Save Up Your Money, John D. Rockefeller Put the Panic On”
“I Am the Light of This World”
“Nobody Cares for Me”
“Slippin’ ’til My Gal Comes In Partner”
“Blues”
“Crucifixion”
“Rag Blues in C”
“Blues in E”
“Square Dance Verses”
“Don’t Know Where to Go”
“He’s My King”
“I’m Thrown’ Up My Hands (Ain’t Gonna Work No More)”
“Cross and Evil Woman Blues”
“Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning”
“I’m So Tired of Being All Alone”
“I Am the True Vine”
“Lord, Stand by Me”
“Won’t You Hush”
“Mean Old World”
“Moon Is Going Down”
“Sportin’ Life Blues”
“God’s Gonna Separate”
“Soon My Work Will All Be Done”
“Blow Gabriel”
“Get Right Church”
“I Want to Be Saved”
“Oh Glory, How Happy I Am”
“There’s Destruction in That Land (Message from Heaven)”
“Tired, My Soul Needs Resting”
“Georgia Camp Meeting”
”Bill Bailey”
“Honey Get Your Towel Wet”
“She Wouldn’t Say Quit”
“You’re Going to Quit Me Baby”
“I’m Going to Sit Down on the Banks of the River”
“Twelve Gates to the City”
“I Heard the Angels Singing”
“Twelve Sticks”
“It’s a Long Way to Tipperary”
“When the Train Comes Along”
“Little Boy, Little Boy Who Made Your Britches”
“All Night Long”
“Who Shall Deliver Poor Me”
“Jesus Met the Woman at the Well”
“Lord, Search My Heart”
“Lord, On Your Word”
“Let Us Get Together”
“Cocaine Blues”
“Devil’s Dream”
“Blow Gabriel”
“Sun is Going Down”
“Spoonful”
“Whistlin’ Blues”
“Virgin Mary”

“Improvisation: Fast Blues in A”
“Improvisation: Slow Blues in E”
“West Coast Blues”
“Improvisation: Rag in A Minor”
“Two-Step”
“Horse Thief’s Blues”
“Candy Man”
Cigarette break
“Improvisation: Hills and Valleys”
“Seven Sisters”
“Crucifixion”
“I Decided to Go Down”
“Sun Is Going Down”
“My Heart Is Fixed”
“Hold to God’s Unchanging Hand” (congregation)
Davis speaks
“My Home Is On High”
Sermon
“Improvisation: Coco Blues”

2003: Reverend Gary Davis, If I Had My Way: Early Home Recordings (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings SFWCD 40123)
“If I Had My Way”
“If the Lord Be for You”
“Twelve Gates to the City”
“You Got to Move”
“We Are the Heavenly Father’s Children”
“A Friend like Lonely Jesus”
“Get Right Church”
“Marine Band”
“Shine on Me”
“There’s Destruction on This Land”
“He Stole Away”
“The Uncloudy Day”
“Say No to the Devil”
“I Belong to the Band”
“Give Me a Heart to Love” (Reverend McKinley Peebles only)
“He Never Has Left Me Alone”
“Got on My Travelin’ Shoes”
“Civil War Parade”

“Samson & Delilah”
“Death Don’t Have No Mercy”
“Cross & Evil Woman Blues”
“Can’t Be Satisfied”
“Lord I Wish I Could See”
“Twelve Gates to the City”
“Out on the Ocean Sailing”
“Whistlin’ Blues”
“Candy Man”
“How Happy I Am”
“I Belong to the Band – Hallelujah!”
“Bad Company (Brought Me Here)”
“Crucifixion”
“You Got to Move”
“Cocaine Blues”
“Soon My Work Will Be All Done”
2004: Reverend Gary Davis, From Blues to Gospel (Biograph/Shout! Factory DK 34007)
“Talk on the Corner”
“Sally, Where’d You Get Your Whiskey”
“Crow Jane”
“Eagle Rocking Blues”
“Cocaine Blues”
“Lost John”
“Samson and Delilah”
“I Heard the Angels Singing”
“Lord I Wish I Could See”
“Down By the River”
“You Better Get Right”
“I’ll Do My Last Singing”

2007: Reverend Gary Davis, Manchester Free Trade Hall 1964 (Document DOCD 32-20-14)
“You Got to Move”
“If I Had My Way”
“The Sun Is Going Down”
“I’m a Soldier”
“I Got A Little Mama, Sweet As She Can Be”
“Sally, Please Come Back To Me (Worried Blues)”
“Cocaine Blues”
“Cincinnati Flow Rag”
“Children of Zion”
“Coon Hunt (Harmonica Instrumental)”
“Maple Leaf Rag”

2008: Blind Gary Davis and Rosetta Tharpe, Jazz (LRC Ltd. n.n.)
“Little Ragtime” [“Cincinnatti Flow Rag”]
“Maple Leaf Rag”
“Pickin Rag” [“Buck Rag”]
“Lord Search My Heart” [“I Told Jesus I’d Bear My Burden If He’d Write My Name”]
“Sonny Go Down” [“Sun Is Going Down”]
“Right Now” [“Great Change Since I’ve Been Born”]
“You Got to Go Down” [“Tell Me John”]
“Let Us Get Together” [“Samson and Delilah”]


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7This is a digital reissue of tracks from New Blues & Gospel: 1971 Vol. 1 (Biograph BLP-12030) and The Legendary Reverend Gary Davis, 1971: Blues and Gospel (Biograph BLP-12034).

8Davis’s performances are certainly from the American Folk Blues and Gospel Caravan tour of Britain, on which Davis and Terry both played. Tracks 4-8 also found on Groove Jams, GJ97006, 1998; see Compilations.
“You Got to Move”
Intro to “Come Down and See Me Sometime”
“Come Down and See Me Sometime”
“Wouldn’t Say Quit”
“Oh Lord”
Announcing Guitar Lessons
“People That Use to See Can’t See No More”
“There’s Destruction in This Land”
Intro to “Soon My Work Will All Be Done”
“Soon My Work Will All Be Done”
Intro to “Oh Glory, How Happy I Am”
“Oh Glory, How Happy I Am”
“I Want to Be Saved”
“Just a Closer Walk with Thee”
“Death Don’t Have No Mercy”
“Lord I Won’t Go Back in Sin”
“Candyman”
“Buck Dance”
“Samson and Delilah”
“Working on the Building”
“I’ll Fly Away”
“Sun Goin’ Down”
“Fox Chase”
“God’s Gonna Separate”
“Lord Search My Heart”
“Jesus Met the Woman at the Well”
“Say No to the Devil”
“I Am a Pilgrim”
“All Night Long”
“Trying to Get to Heaven”
“Thank You Jesus”
“Twelve Sticks”
Intro to “Tesse”
“Tesse”
“Lord They Tell Me”
“Right or Wrong”

“Twelve Sticks”
“Sally, Where’d You Get Your Liquor From”
“Babylon Is Falling”
“What Could I Do”
“Children of Zion”
“Hesitation Blues”
“Candyman”
“Steal Away And Pray”
“Goin’ To Chattanooga”
“Packing Up, Get Ready To Go”
Untitled [“(I Got a Woman Crazy for Me) She’s Funny That Way”]
“You Cry Because I’m Leaving”
“Don’t Let My Baby Catch You Here”
“Lord Let Me Live Longer”
“I Want To Be Saved”
“Waltz Time Candyman”
“Little Boy Who Made Your Britches”
Talks about Verses Not Sung
“C Rag”
“Two Step Candyman”
“Piece Without Words”
“Lord Search My Heart”
“Slippin’ To My Gal Comes In Partner”
“Sun Is Going Down”
“Raise A Ruckus Tonight”
“Save Up Your Money, John D. Rockefeller Put the Panic On”
“Soon My Work Will All Be Done”
“You’re Gonna Need King Jesus”
“I’m Going Back To Jesus”
“Blues in C”
“Saddle It Around”
“People Who Use To See”
“Italian Rag”
“Candyman”
“Nobody Don’t Care For Me”
“Fox Chase”
Talk on Blind Boy Fuller
“Amazing Grace”\(^9\)
Sermon
“I’m a Soldier in the Army of the Lord”
Sermon\(^10\)
“Lord, I Feel Just Like Goin’ On”
“Steal Away”\(^11\)
“Can’t Make This Journey By Myself”
Sermon
“I Will Overcome Someday”
“God Be With You”

\(^9\)Performed as a medley with “I Will Trust in Jesus.”

\(^10\)Includes an unlisted performance of “The Day Is Past and Gone.”

\(^11\)Contains a performance of “Calvary” within the track as well.
“I Got Religion I’m So Glad”
“I’m a Soldier in the Army of the Lord”

**Compilations with performances by Reverend Gary Davis**

**ca. 1954:** *American Folksay Ballads and Dances Vol. 5* (Stinson SLP 12, n.d.; reissued on compact disc as *American Folksay Ballads and Dances Volumes 5 & 6* and *Chain Gang Volumes 1 & 2*, Collectables COL-5601, 1995)
“When the Train Comes Along” (1954)

**ca. 1956:** *Riverside Folksong Sampler* (Riverside LP-2285)
“Blow Gabriel” (1956)

**1957:** *Music in the Streets* (Folkways FD 5581)
Untitled (“Twelve Sticks,” 1950)

**1960:** *Hootenanny at Carnegie Hall* (Folkways FN 2512)
“If I Had My Way” (1958)

**1963:** *Philadelphia Folk Festival, Vol. 2* (Prestige/International 13072)
“If I Had My Way”
“Sally, Where’d You Get Your Liquor From?”
“You Got to Move” (all 1962)

**1964:** *Blues at Newport, 1963* (Vanguard VSD-79145, US; Fontana TFL 6037, UK)
“Samson and Delilah”
“You Got to Move” (both 1959)

**1966:** *Blues Rediscoveries* (Folkways RBF 11)
“Oh Lord, Search My Heart”
“You Got to Go Down” (both 1935)

**1967:** *Folk Blues: Blind Reverend Gary Davis, Elder Brody and Other Artists* (Continental Records CLP-16003)
“I Cannot Bear My Burden by Myself”

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12 Only Davis’s performances are listed. Data in parentheses indicate, when known, the actual recording dates and/or records from which a song or songs were licensed or taken. A 2007 compilation titled *Gospel* (Zyx/House Nation 50) erroneously attributes a track to Davis, who is not on the disc.

13 The song is listed as an unidentified track and was recorded in 1950 by Tony Schwartz for a compilation of New York street musicians. The album commentary simply reads: “The Blind Reverend Gary Davis was recorded playing his guitar on 6th Avenue and 46th Street.”

14 This was a Sing Out! compilation.

15 All tracks were recorded on 8 September 1962 at the Saturday evening concert.

16 Though the album reads “1963,” the Davis selections were recorded at the 1959 festival.
“I’m Gonna Meet You at the Station” (both 1949)

“Civil War Parade” (1945)

1969: **The Mike Raven Blues Sampler** (Transatlantic TRASAM 5, UK)
“Say No to the Devil” (Bluesville BVLP 1049, 1961)

1970: **Blind Boy Fuller on Down Vol. 2** (Matchbox Saydisc SDR 168, UK)
“Cross and Evil Woman Blues”
“Throwing Up My Hands” (both 1935)

1971: **Black Diamond Express to Hell** (Saydisc Matchbox SDX 207/8, UK)
“I Saw the Light” (1935)

1972: **Picture Rags: A Selection of Ragtime Music Played on the Guitar**
(Transatlantic TRASAM 26, UK)
“Italian Rag”
“St. Louis Tickle” (both Transatlantic TRA 244, 1971)

1972: **The Great Blues Men** (Vanguard VSD 25/26)
“If I Had My Way” (1959)

1973: **America: Fantasy Blues Twofer Giants** (Fantasy FP-4)
“I’ll Fly Away”
“When I Die I’ll Live Again” (both Fantasy 24704, 1973)

1974: **Some People Play Guitar….Like a Lotta People Don’t!** (Kicking Mule/Sonet
SNKF 102, UK)
“Swinging Blues”
“Dartown Strutters’ Ball”

1974: **Kicking Mule Record Co.: Where the Guitar Is King** (Sonet SNKB 300, UK)
“Candyman”
“Let Us Get Together”

1975: **Guitar Evangelists Vol. 2** (Truth Records TLP 1003, Austria)
“I Am the Light of This World” (1935)

1976: **Great Bluesmen/Newport** (Vanguard VSD 77/78; VGDC 700772, 1988)
“Death Don’t Have No Mercy”

1976: **Maple Leaf Rag** (New World Records NW 235)
“Maple Leaf Rag”

1976 **Folk Festival** (Transatlantic TRA 324)
“Buck Dance” (Transatlantic TRA 249)

1978: The Guitar Bluesmen Vol. 2 (Golden Hour LP GH 879, UK)
“Death Don’t Have No Mercy”

1988: Bluesville Vol. 1: Folk Blues (Ace Records CH 247, UK)
“You Got to Move” (1961)

1990: Good Morning Blues (Biograph CD 113; reissued as Good Morning Blues: From the Archives of Biograph Records, Collectables, 2007)
“Candy Man”
“Hesitation Blues”
“Whistlin’ Blues”
“How Happy I Am”
“Soon My Work Will All Be Done” (all 1971)

1991: Blind Boy Fuller, East Coast Piedmont Style (Columbia CD 467923)
“Rag Mama Rag”
“You Gotta Change” (both 1935)

1991: Preachin’ the Gospel: Holy Blues (Columbia CD 467890)
“Lord I Wish I Could See” (1935)

1991: Blues at Newport: Recorded Live at the Newport Folk Festival, 1959-1964 (Vanguard 115)
“Samson and Delilah”
“I Won’t Be Back No More”

1991: Folk Song America: A Twentieth Century Revival, Vol. 2 (Smithsonian Collection of Recordings/Sony Music Special Products, RD 046)
“If I Had My Way”

1994: Original Blues Classics (Bluesville/Original Blues Classics OBC 1202)
“Say No to the Devil”

1994: The Prestige/Folklore Years Vol. Four: Singing Out Loud (Prestige/Folklore PRCD-9904)
“If I Had My Way”
“Sally, Where’d You Get Your Liquor From?”
“You Got to Move”
1994: **The Story of Pre-War Blues** (P-Vine Records PCD-2772-75)
   “You Got to Go Down”

1995: **The Music Never Stopped: Roots of the Grateful Dead** (Shanachie 6014)
   “Samson and Delilah”

1995: **Gospel at Newport** (Vanguard 77014)
   “Samson and Delilah”

1995: **Folk Music at Newport, Part 1** (Vanguard VGDC 770072B)
   “I Will Do My Last Singing”

1995: **The Prestige/Folklore Years Vol. Three: Roots and Branches** (Prestige 9903)
   “Let Us Get Together”
   “Twelve Gates to the City”
   “Maple Leaf Rag”

1996: **The Riverside/Folklore Years Vol. 2: Singing the Roots** (Riverside 9910)
   “Oh Lord, Search My Heart”
   “Twelve Gates to the City”
   “Sampson”

   “The Boy Was Kissing The Girl (And Playing The Guitar At The Same Time)”
   "Candy Man”

1996: **American Roots Collection** (Smithsonian Folkways 40062)
   “Time Is Drawing Near”

1997: **Raggin` The Blues: The Essential Recordings Of East Coast Blues** (Indigo IGOCD 2044, UK)
   “I’m Throwing Up My Hands”
   “Cross and Evil Woman Blues” (both 1935)

1997: **Early Soul Gospel** (Vanguard 79505-2)
   “Sampson & Delilah” (sic)

1997: **Vanguard Collector’s Edition** (Vanguard 6366)
   “Samson and Delilah”

1997: **Vanguard Recordings for the Connoisseur** (Vanguard 163/66-2)
   “Samson and Delilah”
“Twelve Gates to the City”

1997: Legendary Blues Singers (Vanguard 504)
“Samson and Delilah”

“You Got to Move”

1998: Generations of Blues, Vol. 3: Guitar Greats (Vanguard 78008)
“Samson and Delilah”

1998: Sweet Heaven – The Sound of Gospel Music (Flapper 7823 PAST CD, UK)
“Lord, Stand by Me”
“I Belong to the Band – Hallelujah!” (both 1935)

1998: Blues Jams (Groove Jams, GJ97006)
“Lord Search My Hart” [I Told Jesus I’d Bear My Burden If He’d Write My Name]
“Sonny Go Down” [Sun Is Going Down]
“Right Now” [Great Change Since I’ve Been Born]
“You Got to Go Down” [Tell Me John]
“Let Us Get Together” [If I Had My Way]

1999: Gospel - La Grande Anthologie, 1927-1963 (Body & Soul 3052952)
“I Am the True Vine” (1935)

2000: As Good As It Gets: Country Blues (Disky DO 247 302, Holland)
“Cross and Evil Woman Blues” (1935)

2001: There is No Eye: Music for Photographs (Smithsonian Folkways SFW40091)
“If I Had My Way” (1953)

2001: Every Tone a Testimony (Smithsonian Folkways SFW47003)
“My Heart Is Fixed”

2001: Philadelphia Folk Festival: 40th Anniversary (Sliced Bread Records 74440)
“If I Had My Way” (1962)

2001: Newport Folk Festival: Best of the Blues 1959-1968 (Vanguard Records 701932)
“Samson and Delilah”
“I Won’t Be Back No More”

2002: American Roots Songbook: The Blues – Traditional Blues from the Heartland
(St. Clair 6785)
“I Saw the Light” (1935)
2002: *Gospel: Negro Spirituals/Gospel Songs/1926-1942* (Fremeaux & Associates 008, France)
   “Twelve Gates to the City” (1935)

2002: *Blues in All Natural: The Best of Acoustic Blues Guitarists* (Prestige/Bluesville BSCP-30024, Japan)
   “Maple Leaf Rag”
   “Samson and Delilah”

   “O Lord Search My Heart”
   “You Can Go Home” (both 1935)

2003: *Classic Blues from Smithsonian Folkways* (Smithsonian Folkways SFW40134)
   “Candy Man”

2003: *Down in the Basement: Joe Bussard’s Treasure Trove of Vintage 78s* (Old Hat 1004)
   “You Got to Go Down” (1935)

2003: *Goodbye, Babylon* (Dust-to-Digital DTD-01)
   “I Belong to the Band – Hallelujah!”
   “I Am the True Vine” (both 1935)

2003: *The Deepest Roots of American Music* (Biograph, n.n.)
   “Lord, I Wish I Could See” (1935)

2004: *A Gospel Story* (BD Blues BDB-183, France)
   “I’m Gonna Meet You at the Station” (1949)

2005: *Gospel Greats* (Soho SOHOCD040)
   “Twelve Gates to the City”
   “I Saw the Light” (both 1935)

2005: *We Are Each Other’s Angels* (Hungry for Music 7326984)
   “I Heard the Angels Singing”

2005: *Prestige Profiles: Lightnin’ Hopkins* (Universal/Concord 5808)
   “Samson and Delilah”

   “Come Down to See Me Sometime”
   “Lost John”
   “Soldier’s Drill”
“Mountain Jack”
“I Didn’t Want to Join That Band”
“Slow Blues in E”

2007: **The Best of Classic Gospel** (Stardust/The Orchard, n.n.)
“I Saw the Light” (1935)

2007: **Gospel – The Ultimate Collection** (The Red Box THERB432)
“Twelve Gates to the City”
“Lord, Stand By Me” (both 1935)

2007: **A First-Time Buyer’s Guide to American Negro Spirituals** (Primo 6038)
“Twelve Gates to the City” (1935)

2008: **Classic African American Gospel from Smithsonian Folkways**
(Smithsonian Folkways SFW40194)
“If I Had My Way” (1953)

2008: **Songs from the Invisible Republic: The Music That Influenced Bob Dylan**
(Repertoire Records 5102)
“Baby, Let Me Lay It on You”

2008: **The History of Black Gospel Music, Vol. 1** (Smith & Co., n.n.)
“If I Had My Way” (1953)

2009: **Century of the Blues** (Chrome Dreams CDCD5003)
“Twelve Gates to the City”

2009: **Town and City Blues** (Starbucks/Concord)
“Death Don’t Have No Mercy”

2009: The New Lost City Ramblers, **Where Do You Come From? Where Do You Go?: 50 Years**
(Smithsonian Folkways Recordings SFW CD 40180)
“I Belong to the Band” (1953)

2009: **The Roots of Gram Parsons** (Snapper 658)
“Candyman”

2010: **Classic Appalachian Blues from Smithsonian Folkways** (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings SFW40198, 2010)
“Hesitation Blues” (1957)
FILMOGRAPHY

1964: **Blind Gary (short film):**
“Sun Is Goin’ Down”
“Lord, I Feel Like Goin’ On”

1966: **Pete Seeger’s Rainbow Quest (television show):**
“Children of Zion”
“Oh Glory How Happy I Am”

**July 1967: University of Washington:***
“Sally Where’d You Get Your Liquor From”
Calling for Irene
“Buck Dance”
“Hard Walkin’ Blues”
“Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning”
“Make Believe Stunt”
Guitar lesson (“Twelve Gates to the City”)
“Twelve Gates to the City”
Advice on playing the guitar
“Twelve Sticks”

**July 1967: Seattle Folklore Society:**
“Twelve Gates to the City”
“Samson and Delilah”
“Cincinnati Flow Rag (Slow Drag)”
“Candyman”
“Sally Where’d You Get Your Liquor From”
“Buck Dance”
“Wouldn’t Say Quit”

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18 Contrary to Vestapol compilations, which list the University of Washington and Seattle Folklore Society performances as having been filmed in either 1966 or 1969, the correct date was July 1967, according to John Ullman, who supervised the shoots (John Ullman, correspondence with author, 22 April 2009).

19 This is a brief improvisation like many that he patterned after ideas first expressed on record in “I’m Throwing Up My Hands” (a.k.a. “Mountain Jack”).
“Oh Glory How Happy I Am”
“(I Heard) The Angels Singing”

1970: **Black Roots (feature film):**
“I Belong to the Band”
“Death Don’t Have No Mercy”

1970: **John Gibbon’s Wedding Party:**
“She’s Just Funny That Way”
“Samson and Delilah”
“Cincinnati Flow Rag (Slow Drag)”
“Spoonful”
“Buck Dance”

**INSTRUCTIONAL BOOKS and VIDEOS**


APPENDIX 4: SACRED/SECULAR BREAKDOWN AND FREQUENCY OF SONGS IN THE REPERTOIRE OF REVEREND GARY DAVIS

Legend: H = home (also office, hotel room); C = concert; S = studio; V = video; P = private tape (unreleased lessons/parties/informal gatherings); CS = church service; SB = songbook (where song is only known through printed version, otherwise not listed); ST = street; T = taught (where song is known only through student). Alternate song titles listed in parentheses. Where performance context is not known, no letter is given.

**SACRED (121)**

1 “Amazing Grace” (1962/67CS)
1 “Angel’s Message to Me, The” (1935S)
1 “Babylon Is Falling” (1962C)
3 “Bad Company Brought Me Here” (1954S; 1957S; 1961S)
4 “Blow, Gabriel” (1956S; 1964/66H; 1962/65C; 1968/70P)
1 “Calvary” (1962/67CS)
1 “Come On Brother, Let’s Go ‘Round the Wall” (1968/70P)
7 “Crucifixion” (“I’m on My Way to the Kingdom”) (1955/57H; 1957S; 1958/59P; 1961S; 1964S; 1968/70P; 1969P)
1 “Day Is Past and Gone, The” (1962/67 CS)
7 “Death Don’t Have No Mercy” (1960S; 1962C x 3; 1963/64C; 1965C; 1970V)
1 “Don’t Know Where to Go” (1958/59P)
2 “Don’t Move My Bed Till the Holy Ghost Come” (1960S; 1968/70P)

1Duets with Davis and others performers have been counted when he shares in the lyric material. Songs on which Davis was accompanist only behind another performer – of which there are thirteen commercially available sides – are not counted here. Davis’s one recorded sermon is not counted as well. Several songs that Davis was remembered playing but which were not recorded or taught have not been included here, such as “I’m on My Way Back Home,” mentioned in Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold’s 1951 interview with Davis, Reel II, Side 2, p. 1; “Billy the Rabbit Skin,” “Step It Up and Go,” “Bile Them Cabbage Down” on banjo, “Tennessee Waltz,” and Bob Dylan’s “Don’t Think Twice, It’s Alright,” all noted in Robert Tilling, ‘Oh, What a Beautiful City’: A Tribute to the Reverend Gary Davis (1896-1972) (Jersey, U.K.: Paul Mill Press, 1992), 18, 28, 32, 43, 73; “Precious Lord, Take My hand,” which he performed on the 1964 Blues and Gospel Caravan tour of Great Britain, mentioned in Robert Gordon, Can’t Be Satisfied: The Life and Times of Muddy Waters (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2002), 187; and two religious numbers heard in an early 1970s concert, “Who’s Gonna Reign Over Heaven” and “Heaven Keeps Raining” (sic?, on harmonica), recalled by Allan Evans, liner notes to Reverend Gary Davis, The Sun of Our Life: Solos, Songs, a Sermon – 1955-1957 (World Arbiter 2005, 2002), 11.

2Performed as a medley with the hymn “I Will Trust in Jesus.”

3Though not a religious song, per se, “Bad Company Brought Me Here” and its account of someone facing the electric chair functions lyrically as a morality tale, one that would have served an evangelical purpose to dissuade folks from a sinful life, and belongs more appropriately in the sacred rather than secular column.

4This hymn, lined out by Davis in a church service, appears on a track simply titled “Sermon,” 2:04 into track four of CD three on Rev. Gary Davis, At Home and Church (Stefan Grossman’s Guitar Workshop SGGW 130/1/2, 2010).
1 “Earth Have No Sorrow” (1960S)
1 “Friend Like Lonely Jesus, A” (1953H)
5 “Get Right Church” (“Going Home on the Morning Train”/“Mornin’ Train”) (1952H; 1956S; 1962C; 1962C; 1966S)
1 “God Be with You” (1962/67CS)
1 “God Don’t Work Like A Natural Man” (1962C)
5 “God's Gonna Separate the Wheat From The Tares” (“God’s Gonna Separate”) (1961S; 1962C x 2; 1968/70P; 1969P)
1 “God Will Take Care of You” (1969S)
5 “Goin’ to Sit Down on the Banks of the River” (“I Won’t Be Back No More”/“Down by the River”) (1960S; 1962C; 1965C; 1968/70P; 1971S)
1 “Got on My Travelin’ Shoes” (1952H)
4 “Great Change in Me, The” (“Great Change Since I Been Born”/“Right Now (Great Change Since I Been Born)”) (1935S; 1960S; 1964C; 1968/70P)
1 “He Stole Away” (1953 H)
1 “He’s My King” (1958/59P)
4 “Hold to God’s Unchanging Hand” (“God’s Unchanging Hand”) (1955/57H; 1961S; 1964C; 1966S)
1 “I Am a Pilgrim” (1962C)
4 “I Am the Light of the World” (“I Am the Light of This World”) (1935S; 1958/59P; 1960S; 1968/70P)
4 “I Am the True Vine” (1935S; 1963H; 1969P; 1971C)
2 “I Decided to Go Down” (“Decided to Go Down”) (1955/57H; 1961S)
1 “I Died to Go Over on the Cloud” (1970SB)
1 “I Got Religion I’m So Glad” (1964C)
7 “I Heard the Angels Singing” (“I Hear the Angels Sing”) (1962C; 1964C; 1967V; 1968/70P x 2; 1971S; 1971C)
1 “I Know I Have Another Building” (1960S)
1 “I Know You’ll Miss Me When I’m Gone” (1964C)
2 “I Saw the Light” (1935 S; 1970SB)
2 “I Told Jesus I’d Bear My Burden If He’d Write My Name” (1964C; 1964P)
2 “I Want to Be Saved” (1962C; 1962/67H)
1 “I Will Overcome Someday” (1962/67CS)

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5 Unissued from Harlem Street Singer sessions.

6 Unissued from Harlem Street Singer sessions.

7 Unissued from Harlem Street Singer, this is most certainly the spiritual best known through a 1920 recording by the Fisk University Jubilee Singers.

8 The only commercial recording by Davis of this song had vocals provided by Bull City Red, yet the song is so tied to Davis’s legacy and repertoire that it has been included here.
5 “I Will Do My Last Singing in This Land Somewhere” (“I’ll Do My Last Singing”/“I Will Do My Last Singing”) (1965C; 1967C; 1968/70P; 1969P; 1971S)
1 “If the Lord Be for You” (1953H)
1 “If You Never Mistreated Nobody, Don’t Do It Now” (1970SB)
2 “I’ll Be All Right Some Day” (“I'll Be Alright”) (1961S; 1962C)
2 “I’ll Fly Away” (1961S; 1962C)
3 “I’m a Soldier in the Army of the Lord” (“I’m a Soldier”) (1962/67CS; 1964C x 2)
1 “I’m Glad I’m in That Number” (1961S)
4 “I’m Gonna Meet You at the Station” (“When the Train Comes Along”) (1949S; 1954S; 1962C x 2)
1 “It’s a Highway to Heaven” (1968/70P)
1 “I’ve Done All My Singing for My Lord” (1965C)
3 “Jesus Met the Woman at the Well” (1954S; 1962C; 1962/65C)
2 “Joy to Know Him” (1960S; 1968/70P)
2 “Just a Closer Walk with Thee” (1962C x 2)
8 “Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning” (1956S; 1958/59P; 1960S; 1962C; 1964C; 1967V; 1968/70P; 1968C)
2 “Little Bitty Baby” (1961S; ca.1969P)
5 “Lo, I Be with You Always” (“Lord I'll Be with You Always”) (1960S; 1962H; 1964S; 1968C; 1969S)
3 “Lord, I Feel Just Like Goin’ On” (1960S; 1962/67CS; 1964V)
1 “Lord, I Looked Down the Road” (1961S)
3 “Lord, I Wish I Could See” (“There Was a Time When I Was Blind”/“There Was a Time That I Was Blind”) (1935S; 1956S; 1971S)
1 “Lord, I Won’t Go Back in Sin” (1962C)
1 “Lord, On Your Word” (1962/65C)
2 “Lord, Stand by Me” (1935S; 1963H)
“Marching to Zion” 9 (T)
1 “Mean Old World” (1963H)
2 “Mind How You’re Living” (“Be Mindful of Your Sacraments”) (1967C; 1971S)
3 “Moon Goes Down” (“Moon Is Going Down”/“Christ Is a Friend (O My Lord)”) (1957H; 1963H; 1966H)
2 “Motherless Children” (1954S; 1961S)
2 “My Heart Is Fixed” (1955/57H; 1957H)
1 “My Home Is On High” 10 (1955/57CS)
1 “Near the Cross” (1962C)
1 “No More” (1964C)
1 “No One Can Do Me like Jesus” (“Nobody Can Do Me like Jesus”) (1961S)

9John Townley learned this song in lessons with Davis.

10Davis sings only, accompanied by an unidentified church pianist.
1 “Old Ship of Zion, The” (1968/70P)
1 “Old Time Religion” (1964C)
1 “Out on the Ocean Sailing” (1969S)
1 “Packing Up, Get Ready to Go” (1962/67H)
2 “People That Use to See, Can’t See No More” (“People Who Use to See”) (1962C; 1962/67H)
3 “Pure Religion” (“You Must Have That Pure Religion”) (1957H; 1960S; 1971C)
3 “Right Now” (“Let the Savior Bless Your Soul Right Now”) (1957H; 1966H; 1969S)
1 “Right or Wrong” (1962C)
1 “Runnin’ to the Judgment” (1957H)
5 “Say No to the Devil” (1952H; 1954S; 1961S; 1962C; 1968/70P)
2 “See What the Lord Has Done for Me” (1968/70P x 2)
1 “Shine on Me” (1953H)
9 “Soon My Work Will All Be Done”11 (1962C x 3; 1962/67H; 1964P; 1968/70P x 2; 1969S; 1971S)
1 “Steal Away” (1962/67CS)12
1 “Steal Away and Pray” (1962/67H)
1 “Tell Me John”13 (1964C)
1 “Thank You Jesus” (1962C)
“There Will Be Stars in My Crown”14 (T)
1 “There’s a Bright Side Somewhere” (1961S)
1 “There’s a Table Sittin’ in Heaven” (1961S)
6 “There’s Destruction in This Land” (“There’s Destruction on This Land”/“There’s Destruction in This Land, Can’t You See”) (1953H; 1962C x 2; 1964H; 1968/70P x 2)
1 “Time Ain’t So Long” (1968C)
3 “Time Is Drawing Near” (“Yeah!”) (1957H; 1961S; 1964S)
1 “’Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus” (1968/70P15)

11 An unissued song from Davis’s 1960 Harlem Street Singer sessions, known only by its identification as “By and By I’m Going to See the King,” is very likely “Soon My Work Will All Be Done” (the alternate title was part of a verse Davis regularly sang in the song).

12 Davis performed both the spiritual “Steal Away” (a.k.a., “Steal Away and Pray”) and “Steal Away to Jesus,” which follows it in this song appendix.

13 Known only through an unidentified live recording; use of first line as title.

14 Ernie Hawkins learned this song in lessons with Davis.
2 “Tryin’ to Get Home” (1960S; 1964C)
2 “Tryin’ to Get to Heaven in Due Time” (1961S; 1962C)
14 “Twelve Gates to the City” (“Oh What a Beautiful City”) (1935S; 1952H; 1954S; 1956S; 1960S; 1962C x 2; 1965C; 1966S; 1967V x 2; 1967C; 1968C; 1968/70P)
2 “Uncloudy Day, The” (“Lord, They Tell Me”) (1952H; 1962C)
1 “Virgin Mary” (1962/63H)
5 “We Are the Heavenly Father’s Children” (“He Knows Just How Much We Can Bear”/“How Much We Can Bear”) (1953H; 1962C; 1964C; 1966S; 1967C)
2 “When I Die I’ll Live Again” (1961S; 1964P)
2 “When the Evening Sun Goes Down” (“Evening Sun Goes Down) (1957S; 1966H)
1 “When the Saints Go Marching In” (1962C)
2 “Who Shall Deliver Poor Me” (“All Night Long,” “Paul and Silas”) (1962C; 1962/65C)
1 “Won’t You Hush” (1963H)
1 “Working on the Building” (“Sure Foundation”) (1962C)
1 “You Better Mind” (1961S)
1 “You Can Go Home” (1935S)
3 “You Got to Go Down” (1935S; 1956S; 1960S)
12 “You Got to Move” (1952H; 1954S; 1959C; 1961S; 1962C x 3; 1964C x 2; 1965C; 1967C; 1971C)
1 “You May ’Buke and Talk About Me” (1970SB)
1 “You’re Gonna Need King Jesus” (1962/67H)

SECCULAR (102)

1 “Aggravatin’ Papa” (1968/70P)
1 “All Night Long” (1962/65C)
1 “Baby, What You Going to Do” (1958/59P)
1 “Banjo Instrumental I” (1964C)
1 “Banjo Instrumental II” (1964C)
1 “Bill Bailey” (1962/63H)
2 “Birmingham Special (“Birdshead Special”) (1966S; 1968C)
1 “Blues” (1958/59P) 1
1 “Blues in A” (1963H)
1 “Blues in E” (1962H)
1 “Bye Bye Blackbird” (1968/70P)
20 “Candy Man” (“Candyman”) (1955/57H; 1957H; 1962C x 2; 1962H; 1962/67H x 3;

15Davis identified the song as “How Sweet to Trust in Jesus.”

16Blues that are improvised, or have no known title, and are not a variation on certain frequent blues formulas that Davis used such as “Mountain Jack” or “Ice Pick Blues,” are counted as unique songs or performances even though the identifying title – as in the case of this twelve-bar in the key of G – might simply be “Blues.”
1964C; 1964S; 1964P x 2; 1966H x 2; 1967V; 1968/70P x 2; 1969P; 1970C; 1971S

1 “CC Rider” (1970C)
1 “Chicken, You Can’t Roost Too High for Me” (1968/70P)
10 “Cocaine Blues” (“Coco Blues”/“Improvisation: Coco Blues”/“Instrumental (Untitled)”) (1955/57H; 1957H; 1962H; 1962/65C; 1963/64C; 1964C; 1966H; 1968/70P x 2; 1971S)
5 “Come Down to See Me Sometime” (“Come Down and See Me Sometime”) (1956/57H; 1962C x 2; 1968/70P; 1970C)
2 “C Rag” (1962/67H x 2)
1 “Crow Jane” (1971S)
2 “Dark Town Strutters’ Ball” (1962/70H; 1968/70P)
3 “Delia” (1969P; ca. 1969P; 1970C)
5 “Devil’s Dream” (“Instrumental Rag”) (1957H; 1962/65C; 1964S; 1966H; 1968/70P)
1 “Dill Pickles Rag” (1968/70P)
2 “Don’t Let My Baby Catch You Here” (1962/63H; 1968/70P)
1 “Down Upon the Sewanee River” (1953H)
1 “Eagle Rocking Blues” (“Mine All Troubled Blues”) (1971S)
3 “Fast Fox Trot”18 (“Buck Rag”) (1962/70H; 1964S; 1968/70P)
1 “Florida Blues” (1968/70P)
3 “Fox Chase” (“Oh Lord”) (1962C x 2; 1962/67H)
1 “Georgia Camp Meeting” (1963H)
1 “Goin’ to Chattanooga” (1962/67H)
1 “Get Along Cindy” (1965C)
5 “Hard Waking Blues” (“Swingin’ Blues”/“Fast Stepping Time”) (1962/70H; 1966S; 1967V; 1968/70P x 2)
1 “Honey, Get Your Towel Wet” (1962/63H)
1 “Horse Thief’s Blues” (1955/57H)
1 “(I Got a Woman Crazy for Me) She’s Funny That Way” (Untitled) (1962/67H)
6 “Ice Pick Blues”19 (“Cross and Evil Woman Blues”/“Blues in E”/“Improvisation: Slow Blues in E”) (1935S; 1955/57H; 1958/59P x 2; 1968/70P x 2)
1 “I’m So Tired of Being All Alone” (1958/59P)

17 “Make Believe Stunt” as listed on Just a Memory CD 9133 is actually “Cincinnati Flow Rag.”

18 A Stefan Grossman-recorded tune by Davis labeled “Buck Rag” appears on the following collections: Transatlantic TRA 244; Kicking Mule KM 106; Heritage HT 309; Heritage HT CD 02; and Shanachie 97024. This same song appears as “Fast Fox Trot” on Prestige/Folklore, PR-14033, but is also given the subtitle “Buck Rag.” Still, I consider it a separate piece since it displays few of the stable ideas heard in the more ubiquitous “Buck Rag” performances of Davis.

19 Though this song was titled “Cross and Evil Woman Blues” at Davis’s 1935 sessions, he consistently referred to it in later years as “Ice Pick Blues.”
1 “Improvisation: Fast Blues in A” (1955/57H)
2 “Italian Rag” (“Improvisation: Rag in A Minor”) (1955/57H; 1962/70H)
1 “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary” (1962C)
1 “Kitty Went a-Courting” (1962C)
1 “Let’s Go Down to Betty’s” (1968/70P)
1 “Long John” (1966S)
2 “Lost Boy in the Wilderness” (1961S; 1968/70P)
7 “Lost John” (“Coon Chase”/“The Coon Hunt”/“Harmonica Solo”) (1956/57H; 1964S; 1964C x 2; 1967C; 1968C; 1971S)
5 “Mama Let Me Lay It on You” (“Baby, Let Me Lay It on You”/“Please Baby”) (1964S; 1968C; 1968/70P; 1969P; 1971C)
15 “Maple Leaf Rag” (“Make Believe Stunt”\(^{20}\)) (1962/70H; 1964S; 1964C x 3; 1964P; 1966H; 1967V; 1967C; 1968/70P x 5; 1970C)
2 “Marine Band” (“Two-step”/“Instrumental March”) (1953H; 1964C)
1 “Masters of War” (1968/70P)
1 “Mean to Me” (1968/70P)
16 “Mountain Jack”\(^{21}\) (I’m Throwing Up My Hands (Ain’t Gonna Work Here No More)”/“Can’t Be Satisfied”/“Sally, Please Come Back To Me (Worried Blues)”/“Slow Blues”/“Please Judy”/“Silvie”/“Sally, Please Come Back to Me (Worried Blues)” (1935S; 1956/57H; 1957H; 1958/59P; 1962H; 1964S; 1964C; 1966H; 1968C x 2; 1968/70P x 3; 1969P; 1969P; 1971C)
6 “Nobody Cares for Me” (“Nobody Don’t Care for Me”) (1958/59P; 1962/67H; 1964P; 1968/70P x 2; 1969P)
1 “Old Fashioned Love” (1968/70P)
1 “Penitentiary Blues” (1968/70P)
2 “Piece without Words” (1962H; 1968/70P)
1 “Pray for the Lights to Go Out” (1968/70P)
2 “Rabbit and the Baboon”\(^{22}\) (ca. 1969 x 2)
1 “Rag Blues in C” (1958/59P)
1 “Raise a Ruckus Tonight” (1962/67H)
1 “Rockin’ Chair Blues”\(^{23}\) (ca. 1969P)
1 “Saddle It Around” (1962/67H)
2 “St. James Infirmary” (1968/70P x 2)
1 “St. Louis Blues” (1968/70P)
1 “St. Louis Tickle” (1962/70H)
9 “Sally, Where’d You Get Your Liquor From” (“Sally, Where’d You Get Your Whiskey From?”/“Sally”/“Old Drunken Sally”) (1962C x 2; 1962/67H; 1967V x 2;

\(^{20}\)“Make Believe Stunt” as listed on Just a Memory CD 9133 is actually “Cincinnati Flow Rag.”

\(^{21}\)Like Davis’s other blues from his 1935 sessions, the title the label gave – “I’m Throwing Up My hands (Ain’t Gonna Work Here No More)” – was at odds with what Davis called the song, which was “Mountain Jack.”

\(^{22}\)The title is taken from the song’s first line.

\(^{23}\)The title is taken from the song’s first stanza.
3 “Save Up Your Money, John D. Rockefeller Put the Panic On” (1958/59P; 1962/67H; 1968/70P)
2 “Seven Sisters” (1955/57H; 1957H)
5 “She Wouldn’t Say Quit” (1962C; 1965C; 1967V; 1968/70P; 1970C)
2 “Slippin’ Till My Gal Comes In Partner” (“Slippin’ Till My Gal Get In”) (1958/59P; 1962H)
1 “Slow Blues in E” (1956/57H)
7 “Soldier’s Drill” (“Civil War March”/“Civil War Parade”/“Soldier’s March”/“United States March”) (1945S; 1956/57H; 1958/59P; 1962C; 1964S; 1965C; 1968/70P)
1 “Soldier’s Joy” (labeled “Guitar and Banjo Duet”) (1966H)
3 “Spoonful” (“Lovin’ Spoonful”) (1962/65C; 1965C; 1970V)
1 “Sportin’ Life Blues” (1963H)
1 “Square Dance Verses” (1958/59P)
1 “Stormy Weather” (1968/70P)
1 Talking Blues in E (ca. 1969P)
1 “Tesse” (1962C)
1 “That’ll Never Happen No More” (1968/70P)
1 “Tie Me to Your Apron Strings Again” (1968/70P)
15 “Twelve Sticks” (“I Didn’t Want to Join That Band”/“The Boy Was Kissing the Girl”/“The Boy Was Kissing the Girl (And Playing the Guitar at the Same Time)”/“Untitled Rag”) (1950ST; 1956/57H; 1957H; 1958/59P; 1962C x 2; 1962/67H; 1964S; 1965C; 1966H; 1967V; 1968C x 2; 1968/70P x 2)
1 Unidentified instrumental in C (1968/70P)
1 Unidentified instrumental in G (1968/70P)
8 “Walkin’ Dog Blues” (“Guitar Blues”/“Mister Jim”/“I Got A Little Mama, Sweet As She Can Be,” “Walking Dog Blues (Happy Blues)”/“Mister Stovepipe”)
(1962/70H; 1964C; 1964S; 1964P; 1968/70P x 2; 1969P; 1971C)
1 “Walkin’ the Dog”25 (1968/70P)
1 “Wedding March” (1968/70P)
2 “West Coast Blues” (1955/57H; 1962/70H)
1 “When You First Said I Love You” (1953H)
3 “Whistlin’ Blues” (1962/65C; 1971S; 1971C)
1 “Whooping Blues” (1962/66H)
1 “Yes Sir, That’s My Baby” (1968/70P)
1 “You Belong to Me” (1968/70P)

24This video performance by the Seattle Folklore Society also shows up on Babylon Is Falling (Stefan Grossman’s Guitar Workshop Inc. Limited Edition Cassettes, n.n., 1984) and Demons and Angels (Shanachie 6117, 2001) erroneously attributed to an earlier home recording date.

25This is not the oft-recorded twelve-bar blues that Davis improvised on but the Shelton Brooks composition.
1 “You Cry Because I’m Leaving” (“Babe, Why You Cryin’ ’Cause I Leave You?”) (1962/67H)  
1 “You Got the Pocket Book I Got the Key” (1970SB)  
1 “You Want a Good Man, Treat a Good Man Right” (1968/70P)  
1 “You’re Goin’ to Quit Me, Baby” (1963H)

Alex Shoumatoff learned this song from Davis, who claimed it was by Cab Calloway and that he figured it out from a record. This song is not, however, Calloway’s tune, “You’ll Cry For Me But I’ll Be Gone,” nor have I found any other comparable number. The famous bandleader did play a Durham tobacco warehouse in 1931, which would have coincided with Davis’s tenure in town. So it is also possible that Davis heard such a song either by a musician who attended the show or just as likely by hanging outside the venue himself in order to pick up popular material for his street act. See Bruce Bastin, Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the Southeast (Urban: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 210.

Title given by Davis; Ernie Hawkins private tape 8, side B.
APPENDIX 5: GUITAR KEYS IN THE REPERTOIRE OF REVEREND GARY DAVIS

Key of G major (71):

Sacred (46)

“Amazing Grace”
“Calvary”
“Crucifixion”
“Don’t Know Where to Go”
“Get Right Church”
“God Be with You”
“Got on My Travelin’ Shoes”
“He Stole Away”
“I Died to Go Over on the Cloud”
“If the Lord Be for You”
“I’ll Fly Away”
“I’m a Soldier”
“I’m Glad I’m in That Number”
“I’m Goin’ to Sit Down on the Banks of the River”
“Jesus Met the Woman at the Well”
“Joy to Know Him”
“Let Us Get Together Right Down Here”
“Little Bitty Baby”
“Lo, I Be with You Always”
“Lord, On Your Word”
“Marching to Zion”
“Mind How You’re Living”
“Motherless Children”
“O Lord, Search My Heart”
“Oh Glory, How Happy I Am”
“Old Ship of Zion, The”
“Old Time Religion”
“Runnin’ to the Judgment”
“Samson and Delilah”
“Say No to the Devil”
“See What the Lord Has Done for Me”
“Shine on Me”
“Soon My Work Will All Be Done”
“Steal Away”
“Tell Me John”

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1This list includes all known documented songs Davis recorded, privately performed, and/or taught on the guitar. See the chapter on technique for usage of “key,” a term of convenience in some ways given the lack of standardized pitch in many of Davis’s performances, especially those on the twelve-string guitar. “Chord shape” is a more accurate description, though that too can vary from fret to fret within the same tonality. Suffice to say, “key of G,” for example, is less clumsy a term than “open position G shape” while making the same point.
“Thank You Jesus”
“There Will Be Stars in My Crown”
“‘Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus”
“Trying to Get to Heaven in Due Time”
“Uncloudy Day, The”
“When the Evening Sun Goes Down”
“When the Saints Go Marching In”
“Who Shall Deliver Poor Me”
“Won’t You Hush”
“Working on the Building”
“You May ’Buke and Talk About Me”

Secular (25)

“Blues”
“Bye Bye Blackbird”
“CC Rider”
“Chicken, You Can’t Roost Too High for Me”
“Don’t Let My Baby Catch You Here”
“Florida Blues”
“Georgia Camp Meeting”
“It’s a Long Way to Tipperary”
“Lost Boy in the Wilderness”
“Lost John”
“Mama, Let Me Lay It on You”
“Marine Band”
“Mean to Me”
“Nobody Cares for Me”
“Pray for the Lights to Go Out”
“Raise a Ruckus Tonight”
“Saddle It Around”
“Stormy Weather”
“Talk on the Corner”
“That’ll Never Happen No More”
“Tie Me to Your Apron Strings Again”
“Twelve Sticks”

Unidentified instrumental in G

“Wedding March”
“When You First Said I Love You”

Key of C major (60):

Sacred (25)

“Come On Brother, Let’s Go ’Round the Wall”
“Great Change in Me, The”
“He’s My King”
“I Am the Light of This World”
“I Am the True Vine”

2On Ernie Hawkins’s private tape 3, side B, song 1.
“I Belong to the Band – Hallelujah!”
“I Got Religion I’m So Glad”
“I Saw the Light”
“If You Never Mistreated Nobody, Don’t Do It Now”
“I’m So Tired of Being All Alone”
“Just a Closer Walk with Thee”
“Little More Faith, A”
“Lord, I Wish I Could See”
“Lord, I Won’t Go Back in Sin”
“Lord, Stand by Me”
“Mean Old World”
“My Heart Is Fixed”
“People Who Used to See Can’t See No More”
“Pure Religion”
“There’s a Table Sittin’ in Heaven”
“Tryin’ to Get Home”
“When I Die I’ll Live Again”
“You Better Mind”
“You Can Go Home”
“You Got to Go Down”

Secular (35)

“Aggravatin’ Papa”
“Bill Bailey”
“Buck Rag”
“Blues in C”
“Candy Man”
“Cincinnati Flow Rag”
“Cocaine Blues”
“C Rag”
“Delia”
“Dill Pickles Rag”
“Fast Fox Trot”
“Hard Walking Blues”
“Honey, Get Your Towel Wet”
“(I Got a Woman Crazy for Me) She’s Funny That Way”
“I Wonder What’s Become of Sally”
“Let’s Go Down to Betty’s”
“Little Boy, Little Boy, Who Made Your Britches?”
“Old Fashioned Love”
“Piece without Words”
“Rabbit and the Baboon”
“Rag Blues in C”

---

1 I have counted this stand-alone banjo-guitar performance of the Blind Boy Fuller song within Davis’s guitar key tally since the instrument was played like a guitar – standard-tuned, six strings – and all of Davis’s other banjo-guitar performances were executed in the same fashion as when he played them on the guitar.
“Sally, Where’d You Get Your Liquor From?”
“Save Up Your Money, John D. Rockefeller Put the Panic On”
“She Wouldn’t Say Quit”
“Soldier’s Joy”
“Sportin’ Life Blues”
“St. Louis Blues”
“St. Louis Tickle”
Unidentified instrumental in C
t
“Walking Dog Blues”
“Wall Hollow Blues”
“West Coast Blues”
“Yes Sir, That’s My Baby”
“You Got the Pocket Book, I Got the Key”
“You’re Goin’ to Quit Me, Baby”

**Key of F major (17):**

*Sacred (8)*
“Angel’s Message to Me, The”
“Blow, Gabriel”
“Friend Like Lonely Jesus, A”
“God's Gonna Separate the Wheat From The Tares”
“He Knows Just How Much We Can Bear”
“I Decided to Go Down”
“Lord, I Looked Down the Road”
“Near The Cross”

*Secular (9)*
“Baby, What You Going to Do”
“Come Down to See Me Sometime”
“Darktown Strutters’ Ball”
“Devil’s Dream”
“Horse Thief’s Blues”
“Soldier’s Drill”
“Tesse”
“Walkin’ the Dog”
“You Belong to Me”

**Key of A major (13):**

*Sacred (6)*
“Babylon Is Falling”
“I Cannot Bear My Burden by Myself”

---

4 On Ernie Hawkins’s private tape 8, side B, song 5.

5 The tune’s defining A strain opens in the key of F, though being a sectional march, it modulates to other keys, notably C, within the performance. Given the extensive use, placement, and technical demands of the sections set in F, however, “Soldier’s Drill” has been included here rather than under the key of C.
“I’m Gonna Meet You at the Station”
“Moon Goes Down”
“Time Is Drawing Near”
“Twelve Gates to the City”
  Secular (7)
“Blues in A”
“Improvisation: Fast Blues in A”
“Maple Leaf Rag”
“Mountain Jack” (a.k.a. “I’m Throwing Up My Hands”)
“Rocking Chair Blues”
“Seven Sisters”
“Spoonful”

**Key of D major (13):**
  Sacred (9)
“I Want to Be Saved”
“I Will Do My Last Singing in This Land Somewhere”
“I’ll Be All Right Some Day”
“Lord, I Feel Just Like Goin’ On”
“Right Now”
“There’s a Bright Side Somewhere”
“There’s Destruction in This Land”
“You Got to Move”
“Steal Away and Pray”
  Secular (4)
“All Night Long”
“When Upon the Sewane River”
“Get Along Cindy”
“Penitentiary Blues”

**Key of E major (9):**
  Sacred (2)
“Bad Company Brought Me Here”
“Sun Is Going Down”
  Secular (7)
“Blues in E”
“Goin’ to Chattanooga”
“Ice Pick Blues” (a.k.a. “Cross and Evil Woman Blues”)
“Crow Jane”
  Talking Blues in E (Rowena)

---

6In the middle of the 1953 recording of the song for John Cohen, Davis tuned his E bass string a step down to D, thereby effecting a dropped D tuning.

7This generically-titled number – found on the cassette and LP versions of I Am a True Vine (Stefan Grossman’s Guitar Workshop Inc. Limited Edition Cassettes, 1984; and Heritage HT 307, 1985, respectively) – is unlike Davis’s other improvisations in E, notably the many he did on “Ice Pick Blues,” and so is considered a separate song idea.
“Slippin’ Till My Gal Gets In, Partner”
“Slow Blues in E”

**Key of E minor (9):**
- Sacred (7)
  “Death Don’t Have No Mercy”
  “I Am a Pilgrim”
  “(I Heard the) Angels Singing”
  “I Told Jesus I’d Bear My Burden If He’d Write My Name”
  “Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning”
  “Packing Up, Get Ready to Go”
  “Virgin Mary”
  Secular (2)
  “Eagle Rocking Blues”
  “Masters of War”

**Key of A minor (7):**
- Sacred (2)
  “Children of Zion”
  “Don’t Move My Bed Till the Holy Ghost Come”
  Secular (5)
  “Hesitation Blues”
  “Italian Rag”
  “St. James Infirmary”
  “You Cry Because I Leave You”
  “You Want a Good Man, Treat a Good Man Right”

**Key of E flat:**
- Sacred (1)
  “It’s a Highway to Heaven”

**Altered open D (scordatura tuning to a D6 chord):**
- Secular (1)
  “Whistlin’ Blues”

---

8. Likely an improvisation, this riff-driven spoken blues exists on a private recording made during a party, Detroit, ca. 1969.

9. Found on the CD Lifting the Veil: The First Bluesmen (World Arbiter 2008), this blues improvisation in E is also different enough from his usual vamps on “Ice Pick Blues’ to be considered a unique entity.

10. “Hesitation Blues” and “You Want a Good Man, Treat a Good Man Right” perhaps belong in their own subcategory since they begin in A minor but modulate to the relative major of C in the course of each song. However, I have included them here given the strong A minor tonality each establishes at song’s outset.
APPENDIX 6. FORMS + KEYS IN BLIND BLAKE RECORDINGS 1926-1932

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title (setting)</th>
<th>Meter + Lyric Form</th>
<th>Pitch/Chord</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1926</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. “West Coast Blues”</td>
<td>8-bar blues rag, instr.</td>
<td>C/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. “Early Morning Blues”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>C/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. “Too Tight”</td>
<td>8-bar, a/Ab (+ 12-bar break)</td>
<td>G/G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. “Blake's Worried Blues”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>C/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. “Come On Boys Let's Do That Messin’ Around”</td>
<td>16-bar blues rag, aBc/cB</td>
<td>F#/G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. “Tampa Bound”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>F/G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. “Skeedle Loo Doo Blues”</td>
<td>16-bar blues rag, AbAb &amp; AAAA¹</td>
<td>B/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. “Stonewall Street Blues”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>G/G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1927</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. “Buck-Town Blues” (g/k)</td>
<td>8-bar blues rag, instr.</td>
<td>C/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. “Black Dog Blues”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>C#/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. “One Time Blues”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>Bb/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. “Dry Bone Shuffle” (gt/bns)</td>
<td>8-bar blues rag, instr.</td>
<td>Eb/C c3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. “That Will Happen No More” (g/bns)</td>
<td>20-bar, aabccdd + EE</td>
<td>Bb/G c3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. “Bad Feelin' Blues”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>Eb/drop D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. “Brownskin Mama Blues”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>C/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. “Sea Board Stomp”</td>
<td>30-bar blues rag, instr.</td>
<td>C/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. “Hey Hey Daddy Blues”</td>
<td>16-bar, AAAb/A</td>
<td>C/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. “You Gonna Quit Me Blues”</td>
<td>8-bar, aBBB</td>
<td>C#/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. “Southern Rag”</td>
<td>44-bar blues rag, instr.</td>
<td>C/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. “Hard Road Blues”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>G#/G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. “Steel Mill Blues”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>G/G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. “He's In The Jailhouse Now” (g/bj)</td>
<td>32-bar, v: aabcccb, ch: AAAb/bA</td>
<td>C/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. “Wabash Rag”</td>
<td>8-bar blues rag, aAb</td>
<td>B/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1928</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. “Hot Potatoes” (trio)</td>
<td>16-bar instr.</td>
<td>B/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. “Southbound Rag” (trio)</td>
<td>16-bar instr.</td>
<td>E/G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. “Doggin’ Me Mama Blues” (g/x)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>C/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. “C C Pill Blues” (trio)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>C/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. “Goodbye Mama Moan”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>C/C</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹This tally does not count alternate takes, part twos, and Blake’s 18 sides backing Leola Wilson (6), Bertha Henderson (5), Gus Cannon (5), Irene Scruggs (4), Elzadie Robinson (2), and Daniel Brown (1). Songs accessed at www.blind-blake.com. No indication of setting means the performance is solo. Where the use of a capo is fairly certain, a lowercase c plus a numeral indicating fret position is given under the pitch/chord column; for example, Eb/C c3 means the pitch is Eb but the song s played in a C shape capoed up three frets.
29. “Tootie Blues”  | 16-barR, aaBBB\(^1\)  | C/C
30. “That Lovin’ I Crave”  | 16-bar, aab/bC/C  | F#/G
31. “No Dough Blues”  | 12-bar, AAa  | C/C
32. “Rumblin’ And Ramblin’ Boa Constrictor”  | 12-bar, AAa  | B/C
33. “Bootleg Rum Dum Blues”  | 12-bar, AAa  | G/G
34. “Detroit Bound Blues”  | 12-bar, AAa  | C/C
35. “Panther Squall Blues” (g/h)  | 12-bar, AAa  | G/G
36. “Walkin’ Across the Country”  | 12-bar, AAa  | C/C
37. “Search Warrant Blues”  | 12-bar, AAa  | F/F
38. “Ramblin’ Mama Blues”  | 12-bar, AAa  | C#/C
39. “New Style of Loving”  | 12-barR, a/aBB\(^1\)  | C/C
40. “Back Door Slam Blues”  | 12-bar, AAa  | C/C
41. “Notoriety Woman Blues”  | 12-bar, AAa  | F/F
42. “Cold Hearted Mama Blues”  | 12-bar, AAa  | F#/G
43. “Low Down Loving Gal”  | 16-bar, aaBccB  | G/G
44. “Sweet Papa Low Down” (trio)  | 12-bar, instr.  | C/C

1929

45. “Poker Woman Blues” (g/p)  | 12-bar, AAa  | C/C
46. “Doing A Stretch” (g/p)  | 16-bar, a/aB/cc/B  | F/F
47. “Fightin’ the Jug” (g/p)  | 12-bar, AAa  | F/F
48. “Hookworm Blues” (g/p)  | 12-bar, AAa  | C#/C
49. “Slippery Rag” (g/p)  | 12-bar, instr.  | C#/C
50. “Hastings St” (g/p)  | 12-bar, instr.  | F/G
51. “Diddie Wah Diddie”  | 12-barR, a/aB/BC  | C/C
52. “Chump Man Blues”  | 12-bar, AAa  | D/drop D
53. “Ice Man Blues”  | 12-bar, AAa  | C/C
54. “Police Dog Blues”  | 12-bar, AAa  | Eb/open D
55. “I Was Afraid of That” (g/p)  | 12-barR, a/aB/BC/B  | C/C
56. “Georgia Bound”  | 12 bar, AAa  | C/C
57. “Keep It Home”  | 12-bar, AAa  | G/G
58. “Sweet Jivin’ Mama”  | 12-bar, AAa  | C/C
59. “Lonesome Christmas Blues” (g/p)  | 12-bar, AAa  | C/C
60. “Third Degree Blues” (g/p)  | 12-bar, AAa  | C/C
61. “Guitar Chimes”  | 12-bar, instr.  | C/C
62. “Blind Arthur’s Breakdown”  | through-composed blues rag, C#/C instr.\(^2\)  | 
63. “Baby Lou Blues”  | 12-bar, AAa  | C/C
64. “Cold Love Blues”  | 12-bar, AAa  | G#/G
65. “Papa Charlie And Blind Blake” (g/bj)  | 12-bar instr.  | C/C

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\(^2\)Arguably his most complex tune structurally, this instrumental seems almost stream-of-conscious in its pastiche of Blake’s many blues rag ideas, a string of various ideas including a brief modulation to F (1:04-1:12) that runs its course after three minutes without any literal repeat of a single 8- or 16-bar motif.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Bars</th>
<th>Chords</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>66. “Hard Pushin’ Papa”</td>
<td>12-barR, a/aBB³</td>
<td>A/G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>67. “What A Lowdown Place the Jailhouse Is”</td>
<td>8-bar, a/aB</td>
<td>D/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>68. “Ain’t Gonna Do That No More”</td>
<td>12-barR, a/aB/BB¹</td>
<td>D/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>69. “Playing Policy Blues”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>G#/G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>70. “Righteous Blues”</td>
<td>12-barR, a/aB/BB/C</td>
<td>C#/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>71. “Night and Day Blues”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>G#/G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>72. “Sun to Sun”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>Bb/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>73. “Rope Stretchin’ Blues”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>A#m/Am³</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>74. “Champagne Charlie Is My Name”</td>
<td>16-bar V: ababa</td>
<td>C#/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ch: CCD¹D²</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>75. “Depression’s Gone From Me Blues”</td>
<td>8-bar, a/aBC</td>
<td>F/E</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

³Like Gary Davis’s version of “Hesitation Blues,” “Rope Stretchin’ Blues” opens in a minor tonality but weaves between the minor and relative major, in this case, A minor and C major shapes.
APPENDIX 7. FORMS + KEYS IN BLIND BOY FULLER RECORDINGS 1935-1940

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title (setting)</th>
<th>Meter + Lyric Form</th>
<th>Pitch/Chord</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1935</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*1. “Baby I Don’t Have to Worry”</td>
<td>12-bar R, a/aBC</td>
<td>F/C c5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. “I’m a Rattlesnakin’ Daddy Blues”</td>
<td>12-bar R, a/AB/BBC</td>
<td>D/A c5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*3. “I’m Climbin’ on Top of the Hill”</td>
<td>12-bar R, a/ABB1</td>
<td>A/E c5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*4. “Ain’t It a Cryin’ Shame” (2g)</td>
<td>12-bar R, a/abB</td>
<td>A/E c5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. “Looking for My Woman” (2g)</td>
<td>8-bar, aa</td>
<td>D/A c5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. “Rag Mama Rag” (trio)</td>
<td>12-bar blues rag, a/aa/ABB</td>
<td>F/C c5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. “Baby You Gotta Change Your Mind” (trio)</td>
<td>18-bar blues rag, AAb/bA</td>
<td>F/C c5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*8. “Evil Hearted Woman”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>Bb/G c3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*9. “My Brownskin Sugar Plum”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>C/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*10. “Somebody’s Been Playing with That Thing”</td>
<td>12-barR, a/ABB</td>
<td>A/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. “Log Cabin Blues”</td>
<td>18-bar blues rag AAb/bA</td>
<td>C#/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*12. “Homesick and Lonesome Blues”</td>
<td>12-bar AAa</td>
<td>Eb/open D w/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1936</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*14. “Black and Tan”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>C/A c3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. “Keep Away from My Woman”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>Bb/G c3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*17. “Big Bed Blues”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>Eb/C c3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. “Truckin’ My Blues Away”</td>
<td>18-bar blues rag, AAb/bAA</td>
<td>Eb/C c3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. “She’s Funny That Way”</td>
<td>32-bar blues rag, aaB</td>
<td>Eb/C c3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*20. “Cat Man Blues”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>C/A c3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. “Mama Let Me Lay It on You”</td>
<td>18-bar (8+10), aaBAABB</td>
<td>Bb/G c3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1937</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. “If You Don’t Give Me What I Want” (trio)</td>
<td>18-bar blues rag, AAb/bAA</td>
<td>Eb/C c3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. “Boots and Shoes” (trio)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>G/E c3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Alternate takes, part two recordings, and sides where Fuller was accompanist have not been counted in this tally. Neither have later versions of the same song where the guitar arrangement stayed essentially the same or the title was changed but the song was essentially the same – “Stealin’ Bo-Hog,” for example, is Fuller’s earlier “If You See My Pigmeat” revisited; ditto, “Mojo Hidin’ Woman” and “Stingy Mama,” “Ain’t No Gettin’ Along” and “Weeping Willow,” and “Oozin’ You Off My Mind” and “Baby You Gotta Change Your Mind.” First takes are generally considered throughout. An asterisk indicates a performance that begins with a chordal upper-register triplet figure, an introductory stylistic element within Piedmont blues guitar playing. No indication of setting means the performance is solo. Where the use of a capo is fairly certain, a lowercase c plus a numeral indicating fret position is given under the pitch/chord column; for example, Eb/C c3 means the pitch is Eb but the song is played in a C shape capoed up three frets.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Song Title</th>
<th>Bars</th>
<th>Key</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>“Sweet Honey Hole”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bar, a/AA</td>
<td>F/E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>“Untrue Blues”</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Bar, aa</td>
<td>Bb/A c1</td>
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<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>“Tom Cat Blues”</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Bar, aa</td>
<td>E/E</td>
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<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>“My Baby Don’t Mean Me No Good”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bar, AAa</td>
<td>F#/E c2</td>
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<tr>
<td>*29.</td>
<td>“Been Your Dog”</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Bar, AAa</td>
<td>E/D c2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>“My Best Gal Gonna Leave Me”</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Bar, AAa</td>
<td>G#/G</td>
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<tr>
<td>31.</td>
<td>“Wires All Down”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bar, AAa</td>
<td>A/G c2</td>
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<tr>
<td>32.</td>
<td>“Let Me Squeeze Your Lemon”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bar, AAa</td>
<td>G#/G</td>
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<tr>
<td>*33.</td>
<td>“Death Alley”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bar, AAa</td>
<td>C#/C</td>
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<td>*34.</td>
<td>“Mamie”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bar, AAa</td>
<td>A/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>35.</td>
<td>“Been Your Dog”</td>
<td>11 ½</td>
<td>Bar, AAa</td>
<td>Eb/C c3</td>
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<tr>
<td>36.</td>
<td>“If You See My Pigmeat”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bar, a/BB</td>
<td>Bb/A</td>
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<td>37.</td>
<td>“Stingy Mama”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bar, AAa</td>
<td>Bb/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>38.</td>
<td>“You Never Can Tell”</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Bar, aa</td>
<td>F/E</td>
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<tr>
<td>*39.</td>
<td>“Some Day You’re Gonna be Sorry”</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Bar, aaB</td>
<td>F/E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40.</td>
<td>“Put You Back in the Jail”</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Bar, AAa</td>
<td>C#/C</td>
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<td>41.</td>
<td>“Walking and Looking Blues”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bar, AAa</td>
<td>G#/G</td>
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<td>*42.</td>
<td>“Bulldog Blues”</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>Bb/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>43.</td>
<td>“Where My Woman Usta Lay”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bar, AAa</td>
<td>Bb/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>44.</td>
<td>“Working Man Blues”</td>
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<td>Bar, AAa</td>
<td>E/D c2</td>
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<tr>
<td>45.</td>
<td>“Weeping Willow”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bar, AAa</td>
<td>C/A c3</td>
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<tr>
<td>46.</td>
<td>“Corrine What Makes You Treat Me So”</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Bar, AAa</td>
<td>B/A c2</td>
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<tr>
<td>*47.</td>
<td>“Worried and Evil Man Blues”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bar, AAa</td>
<td>G#/G</td>
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<tr>
<td>*48.</td>
<td>“Break of Day Blues”</td>
<td>11 ½</td>
<td>Bar, AAa</td>
<td>B/A</td>
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<td>49.</td>
<td>“Oh Zee Zas Rag”</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Bar, aaB</td>
<td>C#/C</td>
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<tr>
<td>50.</td>
<td>“Throw Your Yas Yas Back in Jail”</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Bar, AAa</td>
<td>C#/C</td>
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<tr>
<td>*51.</td>
<td>“Snake Woman Blues”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bar, AAa</td>
<td>C#/C</td>
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<tr>
<td>52.</td>
<td>“Steel Hearted Woman”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bar, AAa</td>
<td>F#/E c2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53.</td>
<td>“Careless Love”</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Bar, AAa</td>
<td>B/A c2</td>
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<tr>
<td>*54.</td>
<td>“New Louise Louise Blues”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bar, a/BB</td>
<td>F#/E c2</td>
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<tr>
<td>55.</td>
<td>“Mistreater, Youre Going to Be Sorry”</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Bar, a/BB</td>
<td>A/E c5</td>
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<tr>
<td>56.</td>
<td>“Bye Bye Baby Blues” (g/h)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Bar, aa</td>
<td>G/E c3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57.</td>
<td>“Shaggy like a Bear”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bar, AAa</td>
<td>Bb/G c3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58.</td>
<td>“Ten O’Clock Peep”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bar, AAa</td>
<td>B/A c2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59.</td>
<td>“Hungry Calf Blues”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bar, AAa</td>
<td>B/A c2</td>
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<tr>
<td>60.</td>
<td>“Too Many Women Blues”</td>
<td>9 ½</td>
<td>Bar, a/BB</td>
<td>B/A c2</td>
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<tr>
<td>61.</td>
<td>“Shake Your Shimmy”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bar, a/BB/C</td>
<td>Eb1/C c3</td>
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<tr>
<td>62.</td>
<td>“Heart Ease Blues”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bar, a/BB/C</td>
<td>Eb1/C c3</td>
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<tr>
<td>63.</td>
<td>“I’m Going to Move (To the Edge of Town)” (g/h)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bar, a/BB</td>
<td>G↑/E c3</td>
</tr>
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1938

65. “Pistol Snapper Blues” (g/h) 8-bar, aa G/G
*66. “Mean and No Good Woman” (g/h) 12-bar, AAa G#/E c4
67. “Georgia Ham Mama” (g/h) 12-bar, AAa G/A
68. “Piccolo Rag” 18-bar blues rag, AAb/bA^ Bb/C
69. “Funny Feeling Blues” 12-bar, AAa D↑/E
70. “Painful Heart Blues” 12-bar, AAa C↑/D
71. “You’ve Got to Move It Out” 12-bar R, a/aB/BB/C E/E
72. “Meat Shakin’ Woman” 12-bar, AAa B/C
73. “I’m a Good Stem Winder” 12-bar R, a/aB/BB/C Ab/A
74. “What’s That Smell Like Fish” (g/wb) 18-bar blues rag, AAb/bA^ D↓/C c2
75. “She’s a Truckin’ Little Baby” (g/wb) 24-bar blues rag, aaB D↓/C c2
76. “Jivin’ Woman Blues” (g/wb) 12-bar, AAa A/A
77. “You’re Laughing Now” (g/h) 12-bar R, a/aB/BB/C A/A
78. “Meat Shakin’ Woman” 12-bar, AAa B/C
79. “Long Time Trucker” (g/h) 12-bar, AAa A↑/A
*80. “Big House Bound” (g/h) 10-bar, abb F/E
81. “Flyin’ Airplane Blues” (trio) 18-bar blues rag, AAb/bA^ D/C c2
82. “Jitterbug Rag” (trio) 16-bar blue rag, instr. Bb/G c3
83. “Screaming and Crying the Blues” 12-bar, AAa Bb/G c3
84. “Blacksnakin’ Jiver” 12-bar blues rag, aabC C#/C
85. “I Don’t Care How Long” (g/h) 12-bar, AAa E↑/open D c2

w/s
87. “You’ve Got Something There” (trio) 12-bar R, a/aB/BC/B D↓/C c2 (d’
tonic)
88. “Baby Quit Your Low Down Ways” 12 ¾-bar, AAa B/G c4
89. “It Doesn’t Matter Baby” 8-bar, a/ABC B/G c 4
*90. “Black Bottom Blues” 12-bar, AAa Eb↑/C c3
91. “I Crave Pigmeat” (g/wb) 18-bar blues rag, AAb/bA^ Bb/G c3
92. “Big Leg Woman Gets My Pay” (g/wb) 12-bar, AAa G/E c3
93. “I’m a Stranger Here” (trio) 12-bar, AAa F↑/open D c3

w/s
94. “Red’s Got the Piccolo Blues” (trio) 16-bar blue rag, A/AaA/Ab D↑/C c2
95. “I Want Some of Your Pie” (g/h) 12-bar R, a/AB/BB/C F/E
96. “Jivin’ Big Bill Blues” 12-bar R, a/AB^ F/E
97. “Woman You Better Wake Up” (g/h) 12-bar, AAa A/E c5

1940

98. “Step It Up and Go” (g/wb) 12-barR, a/ABB G/G
99. “Worn Out Engine Blues” 12-bar, AAa Bb↓/G c3
100. “Blue and Worried Man” (trio) 8-bar, aa E↑/E
101. “Passenger Train Blues” 12-bar, AAa G↓/G
102. “Shake It Baby” (g/wb) 24-blues rag, A/AA/B C#/C
103. “Somebody’s Been Talking” (trio) 8-bar, aa B/A c2
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Track</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Imitation</th>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Chords</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>104.</td>
<td>“Three Ball Blues” (g/hm)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>B/A c2</td>
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<tr>
<td>105.</td>
<td>“Little Woman You’re So Sweet”</td>
<td>8-barR, aB</td>
<td>D↑/open D</td>
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<tr>
<td>106.</td>
<td>“Good Feeling Blues” (trio)</td>
<td>12-barR, a/AB/BB/C</td>
<td>E↑/E</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>107.</td>
<td>“You Can’t Hide from the Lord” (trio)</td>
<td>16-bar, ABCD</td>
<td>C/C</td>
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<tr>
<td>108.</td>
<td>“Twelve Gates to the City” (trio)</td>
<td>22-bar (10+12), AAAB</td>
<td>G/A + abcdB</td>
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<tr>
<td>109.</td>
<td>“Crooked Woman Blues”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>D/D</td>
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<tr>
<td>110.</td>
<td>“I Don’t Want No Skinny Woman” (trio)</td>
<td>12-barR, a/ABB</td>
<td>F/E</td>
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<tr>
<td>111.</td>
<td>“Bus Rider Blues” (trio)</td>
<td>20-bar, A/Abb</td>
<td>F/E</td>
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<tr>
<td>112.</td>
<td>“You Got to Have Your Dollar” (g/h)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>F↓/E</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>113.</td>
<td>“Lost Lover Blues” (g/wb)</td>
<td>16-barR, abBB</td>
<td>A↑/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>114.</td>
<td>“Thousand Women Blues”</td>
<td>9-barR, aBB</td>
<td>Bb/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>115.</td>
<td>“Bye Bye Baby” (g/h)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>E↑/E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>116.</td>
<td>“When You Are Gone”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>G#↓/G</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>117.</td>
<td>“No Stranger Now” (g/wb)</td>
<td>16-bar, AbB</td>
<td>C↓/C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>118.</td>
<td>“Must Have Been My Jesus” (g/wb)</td>
<td>16-bar, AAAA</td>
<td>Bb/C</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>119.</td>
<td>“Jesus Is a Holy Man” (g/wb)</td>
<td>16-bar, ABAB</td>
<td>C↓/C</td>
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<tr>
<td>120.</td>
<td>“Night Ramblin’ Woman”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>G/G</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 8. FORMS + KEYS IN JOSH WHITE RECORDINGS 1932-1942

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title (setting)</th>
<th>Meter + Lyric Form</th>
<th>Pitch/Chord</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. “Black and Evil Blues”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>G#/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. “Little Brother Blues”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>G#/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. “Howling Wolf Blues”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>A/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. “Crying Blues”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>G/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. “Things About Coming My Way”</td>
<td>8-barR, aaB</td>
<td>A/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. “Bad Depression Blues”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>D/open D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. “Greenville Sheik”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>G/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. “Good Gal”</td>
<td>12-barR, a/aBB</td>
<td>Eb↑/open D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. “High Brown Cheater”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>D/open D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. “Double Crossing Women”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>A/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. “So Sweet, So Sweet”</td>
<td>8-barR, aaB</td>
<td>E/open D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. “Lazy Black Snake Blues” (g/p)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>F/open D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. “Downhearted Man Blues” (g/p)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>C/open D</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 15. “Low Cotton”                   | 12-bar, AAa        | G#/A          |
| 16. “Blood Red River”              | 8-bar, aa (w/12-bar breaks) | D↑/E          |
| 17. “Jesus Gonna Make Up My Dyin’ Bed” | 16 bar (8+8), abcB + ABAC | B↑/open D    |
| 18. “Motherless Children”          | 16-bar, AAb/bA     | B↑/open D     |
| 19. “Pure Religion Hallilu”        | 16-bar, AAA/aA     | D#↑/open D    |
| 20. “I Don’t Intend to Die in Egyptland” | 16-bar (8+8), AAaA + BBBA | D#↑/open D   |
| 21. “This Heart of Mine”           | 24 bar, AAAB + AAAB | Bb↑/open D   |
| 22. “There’s a Man Goin’ Around Taking Names” | 16-bar, AAa/aA | Bb↑/open D |
| 23. “Lay Some Flowers on My Grave” | 16-bar, AAb/bA     | A↑/open D     |
| 24. “Lord, I Want to Die Easy”     | 16-bar, AAa/aA     | C#↑/open D    |
| 25. “My Father Is a Husbandman”    | 16-bar (8+8), AAAB+ aBaB | Eb↑/open D   |
| 26. “Death’s Coming Back After You”| 16-bar, AAb/bA     | D↑/open D     |

1 Alternate takes, Part two recordings, and sides where White only sang or was accompanist have not been counted in this tally. Neither have later re-recordings of a particular tune or numbers that are essentially the same as a previous song but with a new title, as is the case with White’s “Hard Time Blues” from 1940, a not-so-veiled run-through of 1932’s “Things About Coming My Way” (though played as a 9-bar structure the second time around). First takes are generally considered throughout. Songs have only been considered through 1942, since this was the greatest concentration of recorded blues and gospel music in his repertoire and arguably the music closest to his Piedmont roots – his performances took on a decidedly different tone beginning in the mid-1940s with the overt addition of topical, jazz, and popular song as he became an established club/cabaret star within New York’s nascent folk movement. No indication of setting means the performance is solo.
1934
27. “Can’t Help But Crying Sometimes” 16-bar, AAb/bA & aab/bA  C#/open D
28. “Four and Twenty Elders” 18-bar, AABA¹  Eb/open D
29. “Down on Me” 16-bar, aaBA + AABA  D/open D
30. “You Sinner You” 16-bar, AAb/bA  B/C
31. “Welfare Blues” (g/p) 12-bar, AAa  C/A
32. “Stormy Weather No. 1” 12-bar, AAa  G#/A
33. “I Believe I’ll Make a Change” (g/p) 12-bar, AAa  Eb/A
34. “Friendless City Blues” (g/p) 12-bar, AAa  Eb↑/open D
35. “Gone Mother Blues” (g/p) 12-bar, AAa  Eb↑/open D
36. “Mean Mistreater Mama”² (g/p) 12-bar, AAa  Bb↑/open D
37. “Evil Man Blues” (g/p) 12-bar, AAa  Eb↑/open D
38. “Black Gal” (g/p) 12-bar, AAa  Bb↑/A
39. “Milk Cow Blues” (g/p) 12-bar, AAa  Bb↑/A
40. “DBA Blues” (g/p) 12-bar, AAa  F↑/open D
41. “Badly Mistreated Man” (g/p) 12-bar, AAa  F#↑/E
42. “Bed Spring Blues” 12-bar, AAa  F↑/E
43. “Sissy Man” (g/p) 12-bar, AAa  Bb/A
44. “Homeless and Hungry Blues” (g/p) 12-bar, AAa  F/E
45. “I Got a Home in That Rock” (g/p) 16-bar, AAb/bA  F/open D
46. “Paul and Silas Bound in Jail” (g/p) 16-bar, AAAB  F/open D
47. “Jet Black Woman” (g/p) 12-bar, AAa  Eb/open D
48. “Pigmeat and Whiskey Blues” (g/p) 12-bar, AAa  F/open D
49. “Prodigal Son” (g/p) 12-bar, AAa  Ab/A
50. “While the Blood Runs Warm in Your Veins” (2g) 16-bar, AABA & abcb  C#/open D
51. “Trying to Get Home” (2g) 16-bar, AAA/AA  C#/open D
52. “Got a Key to the Kingdom” (2g) 16-bar (8+8), ABAB + abcb  C#↑/open D
53. “My Soul Is Gonna Live with God” (2g) 17-bar (9+8), AAAB + abcb  Eb/open D
54. “On My Way” (2g) 16-bar (8+8), abab  C#↓/open D
55. “How About You” (2g) 16-bar (8+8), aaaa + AA¹A²A  E↓/open D
56. “Talking about My Time” (2g) 12-bar, AAa  E↓/open D
57. “Did You Read That Letter?” (2g) 16-bar (8+8), abab + AA¹AB E↑/open D
58. “When the Sun Goes Down” 12-bar, AAa  E↑/A
1935
38. “Black Gal” (g/p) 12-bar, AAa  Bb↑/A
39. “Milk Cow Blues” (g/p) 12-bar, AAa  Bb↑/A
40. “DBA Blues” (g/p) 12-bar, AAa  F↑/open D
41. “Badly Mistreated Man” (g/p) 12-bar, AAa  F#↑/E
42. “Bed Spring Blues” 12-bar, AAa  F↑/E
43. “Sissy Man” (g/p) 12-bar, AAa  Bb/A
44. “Homeless and Hungry Blues” (g/p) 12-bar, AAa  F/E
45. “I Got a Home in That Rock” (g/p) 16-bar, AAb/bA  F/open D
46. “Paul and Silas Bound in Jail” (g/p) 16-bar, AAAB  F/open D
47. “Jet Black Woman” (g/p) 12-bar, AAa  Eb/open D
48. “Pigmeat and Whiskey Blues” (g/p) 12-bar, AAa  F/open D
49. “Prodigal Son” (g/p) 12-bar, AAa  Ab/A
50. “While the Blood Runs Warm in Your Veins” (2g) 16-bar, AABA & abcb  C#/open D
51. “Trying to Get Home” (2g) 16-bar, AAA/AA  C#/open D
52. “Got a Key to the Kingdom” (2g) 16-bar (8+8), ABAB + abcb  C#↑/open D
53. “My Soul Is Gonna Live with God” (2g) 17-bar (9+8), AAAB + abcb  Eb/open D
54. “On My Way” (2g) 16-bar (8+8), abab  C#↓/open D
55. “How About You” (2g) 16-bar (8+8), aaaa + AA¹A²A  E↓/open D
56. “Talking about My Time” (2g) 12-bar, AAa  E↓/open D
57. “Did You Read That Letter?” (2g) 16-bar (8+8), abab + AA¹AB E↑/open D
58. “When the Sun Goes Down” 12-bar, AAa  E↑/A
1936
59. “No More Ball and Chain” 12-bar, AAa  A/A
60. “Silicosis Is Killin’ Me” 12-bar, AAa  E/open D

²It is generally considered that Scrapper Blackwell played guitar on this side – see Robert M. W. Dixon, John Godrich, and Howard Rye, Blues & Gospel Records 1890-1943, 4th ed (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 1020 – but to my ears, the phrasing, attack, and overall musicality sound like White, unlike the other song from this session attributed to Blackwell, “She’s Alright with Me,” which is more likely Blackwell on guitar.
1940
61. “Careless Love” (trio) 16-bar, AAbb & AAAa  F/open D
62. “Prison Bound” (g/bs) 12-bar, Aa  A/A
63. “Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday” (trio) 12-bar, AAb  Eb↑/open D
64. “Chain Gang Boun’” (qn) 16-bar, abcd  F/open D
65. “Nine Foot Shovel” (qn) 12-bar, Aa  G/A
66. “Trouble” (qn) 24-bar (16+8), aabb + AA↑  E/E
67. “Told My Cap’n” (qn) 8-bar, aa  E/E
68. “Goin’ Home, Boys” (qn) 12-bar, Aa  G#/A
69. “Cryin’ Who? Cryin’ You!” (qn) 12 ½ barR, aAB  G#↑/A
70. “Jerry” (qn) 16-bar (8+8), aabb +AA↑  G#m6↑/Em6
71. “Glory to His Name” (qn) 16-bar (8+8), aabC +F/E  AA↑BC↑
72. “King Jesus Knows I’m Coming” (qn) 16-bar, abbcddd  F/E
73. “I Wonder Will My Mother Be on Dat Train” (qn) 16-bar, AABA & aab/bA  Eb↑/E
74. “Soon in De Mornin’” (qn) 32-bar, AA’BA + abc  F#/E

1941
75. “I Lay a-Dreamin’” (qt) 12-bar, Aa  E↓/E
76. “Gotta Go” (qt) 12-bar, Aa  G#↑/A
77. “Eve’s Apple Tree” (qt) 12-bar, Aa  F↑/E
78. “She’s a Married Woman” (qn) 12-bar, Aa  Bb↑/A

1941-1942
80. “Bad Housing Blues” 12-bar, Aa  C#/A
81. “Hard Times Blues” 24-bar, (16+8) aabb +AA↑AA↑  Ebm/Em
82. “Uncle Sam Says” 12-barR, a/abb  C#/A
83. “Southern Exposure” 16-bar, AAAa  Eb/E
84. “Jim Crow Train” 16-bar, AAAa  Eb/open D
85. “Whatcha Goin’ to Do” 16-bar, AA↑b/B  D/D
86. “Evil Hearted Man” 12-barR, a/ABB↑  F#/E
87. “John Henry” (slide) 10-bar, abcBB  D↑/open D
88. “House of the Rising Sun” 16-bar, abc  Cm/Am
89. “Strange Fruit” 16-bar, aabb  Cm/Am
## APPENDIX 9. FORMS + KEYS IN EUGENE “BUDDY” MOSS RECORDINGS 1933-1941

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title (setting)</th>
<th>Meter + Lyric Form</th>
<th>PitchChord</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1933</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. “Bye Bye Mama” (2g)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>E/open D w/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. “Daddy Don’t Care” (2g)</td>
<td>18-bar blues rag, AAb/bA</td>
<td>B/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. “Red River Blues” (2g)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>Eb/E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. “Cold Country Blues” (2g)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>E/open D w/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. “Prowling Woman”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>C#/open D w/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. “T.B.’s Killing Me” (2g)</td>
<td>12-barR, aaBB</td>
<td>C#/open D w/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. “When I’m Dead and Gone” (2g)</td>
<td>12-barR, aaBB</td>
<td>C#/open D w/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. “Hard Times Blues” (2g)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>C/open D w/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. “Prowling’ Gambler Blues” (2g)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>C#/open D w/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. “Hard Road Blues” (2g)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>C/open D w/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. “Jealous Hearted Man” (2g)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>C/open D w/s</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. “Midnight Rambler” (2g)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>Eb/E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. “Best Gal” (2g)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>G1/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. “Restless Night Blues” (2g)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>G1/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. “Married Man’s Blues” (2g)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>Eb/E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. “Somebody Keeps Calling Me” (2g)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>A/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. “Back to My Used to Be” (2g)</td>
<td>12-barR, aaBB</td>
<td>A/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. “Can’t Use You No More” (2g/2v)</td>
<td>18-bar blues rag, Aab/bA</td>
<td>G/G</td>
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<tr>
<td>19. “Travelin’ Blues” (2g)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>A/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>20. “Bachelor’s Blues” (2g)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>A/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. “Broke Down Engine” (2g)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>E/E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. “B &amp; O Blues No. 2” (2g)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>G#/A</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1934</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>23. “New Lovin’ Blues”</td>
<td>8-bar, aa</td>
<td>C#/drop D</td>
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<tr>
<td>24. “Unkind Woman”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>D/E</td>
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<td>25. “When the Hearse Roll Me from My Door”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>A/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>26. “Insane Blues”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>B/drop D</td>
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<tr>
<td>27. “Tricks Ain’t Walking No More”</td>
<td>18-bar, Aab/bA</td>
<td>B/C</td>
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<tr>
<td>28. “Stinging Bull Nettle”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>Eb/E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. “Oh Lordy Mama”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>Eb/E</td>
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<tr>
<td>30. “Dough Rolling Papa”</td>
<td>12-barR, aaB/BBC</td>
<td>G/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>31. “Misery Man Blues”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>F/E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. “Jinx Man Blues”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>A1/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. “Evil Hearted Woman”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>E1/E</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^1\)This tally does not count alternate takes, part two sequels, unissued sides, sides by the Georgia Cotton Pickers (on which Moss played harmonica), and sessions where he was accompanist behind Curley Weaver and Josh White.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Title</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>34.</td>
<td>“Too Doggone Jealous”</td>
<td>18-bar, Aab/bA&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>C/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35.</td>
<td>“Someday Baby (I’ll Have Mine)”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>F/E</td>
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<tr>
<td>36.</td>
<td>“Love Me, Baby, Love Me”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>Bb/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37.</td>
<td>“Sleepless Night”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>G#/G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38.</td>
<td>“Shake It All Night Long”</td>
<td>12-barR, aaBB&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>C#/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1935</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>39.</td>
<td>“Gravy Server”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>G/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>40.</td>
<td>“Going to Your Funeral in a Vee Eight Ford”</td>
<td>12-barR, aaBB&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Eb/E</td>
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<tr>
<td>41.</td>
<td>“My Baby Won’t Pay Me No Mind”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>D/E</td>
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<td>42.</td>
<td>“Undertaker Blues” (2g)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>G#/A</td>
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<td>43.</td>
<td>“Worrisome Woman” (2g)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>G/A</td>
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<td>44.</td>
<td>“Your Hard Head Will Bring You Sorrow Someday” (2g)</td>
<td>8-bar, aaB</td>
<td>Eb/E</td>
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<td>45.</td>
<td>“Can’t Use You No More” (2g)</td>
<td>8-bar, aa</td>
<td>Eb/E</td>
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<td>46.</td>
<td>“See What You Done Done” (2g)</td>
<td>12-bar, Abb</td>
<td>C/C</td>
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<td>47.</td>
<td>“Stop Hanging Around” (2g)</td>
<td>12-barR, aaBB&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>G#/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>48.</td>
<td>“You Got to Give Me Some of It” (2g)</td>
<td>12-barR, aaB/BBC</td>
<td>D#/E</td>
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<td>49.</td>
<td>“Mistreated Boy” (2g)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>B/A</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1941</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>50.</td>
<td>“You Need a Woman”</td>
<td>8-bar, aaB</td>
<td>E/E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51.</td>
<td>“Joy Rag” (trio)</td>
<td>12-barR, aaB/BBC</td>
<td>F/E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52.</td>
<td>“Little Angel Blues” (duo)</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>F/E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53.</td>
<td>“Struggle Buggie” (duo)</td>
<td>12-barR, aaBB&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>A1/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54.</td>
<td>“I’m Sittin’ Here Tonight” (trio)</td>
<td>18-bar, Aab/bA&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>G/G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55.</td>
<td>“Unfinished Business”</td>
<td>12-bar, AAa</td>
<td>Bb/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 10A: PERFORMANCES OF “SUN IS GOING DOWN”

1. “Death Is Ridin’ Every Day” (1954, studio, w/Sonny Terry)
   Guitar/harp intro
   1. Well, the sun is going down.
   2. You’d better run somewhere and pray.
   3. Judgment day is drawing nigh.
   4. You’d better get your business fixed.
   5. My God’s calling every day.
   6. Tears won’t let nobody stay.
   Guitar/harp out

2. “Sun Is Going Down” (1955/57, home)
   Guitar intro
   1. Well, the sun is going down.
   2. You’d better find somewhere to stay.
   3. Don’t you know time is drawing nigh.
   4. You’d better try to get right.
   5. My God’s calling on every hand.
   6. You know you cannot stand.

3. “Sun Goin’ Down” (1962, live at Gerde’s Folk City, New York City)
   Guitar intro
   1. Well, the sun is goin’ down.
   2. You’d better get your business fixed.
   3. My God is coming after you.
   4. Ain’t no time to play.
   5. You had better try to pray.
   6. Death is knocking on your door.
   7. Ain’t no use for you to frown.
   8. You’ve got to go in the ground.
   9. You’ve got to go right or wrong.
   10. Death is coming back after you.
   11. Ain’t no use for you to run.
   12. Runnin’ won’t do you no good.

4. “Sun Is Going Down” (1962, live at The Sign of the Sun, San Diego)
   Guitar intro
   1. Well the sun is going down.
   2. Well it’s bending mighty low.
   3. Well your house is on fire.
   4. Don’t you know you got to die.
   5. You’ve got to go away from here.
   6. Somebody’s dying every day.
   7. You’d better get your business fixed.
   8. My God is calling for you.

742
Guitar break
9. Well, your time ain’t long.

5. “Sun Is Going Down” (1962/65, live at either Golden Vanity or Club 47, both Cambridge, Mass.)
   Guitar intro
   1. Well, the sun is going down.
   2. Better find somewhere to go.
   3. Your house is burning down.
   4. You’d better get somewhere and pray.
   5. You’d better get rid of your sin.
   6. Don’t you hear God calling you.
   7. He call your labor reward.
   8. You better get your work done.
   9. Your house is on fire.

   Guitar intro
   1. Well, the sun is going down.
   2. You better run somewhere and hide.
   3. And the day is drawing nigh.
      Guitar break
   4. Now your time is going in.
   5. You better get rid of your sin.
   6. No, you can’t get in,
   7. And your house is on fire.

7. “Sonny Go Down” (sic) (1964, live in Europe; w/Sonny Terry)
   Guitar/harp intro
   1. Well, the sun is going down.
   2. And it’s bending mighty low.
   3. You’d better go somewhere and pray.
   4. Sonny, you know you can’t stay here.
   5. Your time is going out.
   6. You might as well make it up in your mind.
      Guitar/harp break
   7. Sonny, your house is on fire.

8. “The Sun Is Going Down” (1964, live at Free Trade Hall, Manchester, England; w/Sonny Terry)
   Guitar/harp intro
   1. Well, the sun is going down.
   2. You’d better make your business straight.
   3. You’d better get somewhere and pray.
   4. Judgment day is drawing near.
   5. Yes your time is gonna end.

743
6. You’d better get rid of your sin.
7. Don’t you know there’s no need to cry.
8. Don’t you know you got to die.

9. “Sun Is Going Down” (1966, studio; w/Larry Johnson)
   Guitar/harp intro
   1. Well, the sun is going down.
   2. You better find somewhere to stay.
   3. Judgment day is drawing nigh.
   4. You better go somewhere and pray.
   5. Well, it’s hard times now.
   6. Ain’t no use for you to run.
   7. Running won’t do you no good.
   8. Ain’t no use for you to frown.
   9. Well, it’s time to lay your body down.
  10. Said your time is out.
  11. Said you better make it up in your mind.
  12. You got to leave this world behind.

10. “Sun Is Going Down” (1968/70, Ernie Hawkins private tape)
    Guitar intro
    1. Well, the sun is going down.
    2. Tell me what you gonna do.
    3. Tell me what you gonna do.
    4. You better make it up in your mind.
    5. Well, your house is on fire.
    6. You can’t live there no more.
    7. Says your time is drawing near.
    8. You better try to pray.
    9. Judgment day is drawing nigh.
   10. Say your time isn’t long.
   11. You better get your business fixed.

11. “Sun Is Going Down” (1968/70, Ernie Hawkins private tape)
    Guitar intro
    1. Well, the sun is going down.
    2. Judgment day is drawing nigh.
    3. Well, your house is on fire.
    4. Well, it’s slowly burning down.
    5. Tell me what you gonna do.
    6. Yes, it’s coming back after you.
    7. Tain’t no use for you to run.
    8. Well, it won’t do you no good.
    9. You better make it up in your mind.
   10. Well, your time is drawing near.
   11. You’d better find you a friend.
12. Well, your time ain’t long.
13. Ain’t no where for you to hide.
14. Time for you to take a ride.
15. You best know right and wrong.
16. Well, your time is drawing near.
   Guitar break
17. You better get your business fixed.
18. Says your house is on fire.
   Guitar break

12. “You Better Get Right” (1971, studio)
   Guitar intro
1. Well, you better get right.
2. Judgment day is drawing nigh.
3. You had better try to pray.
4. Well, your house is burning down.
5. Tell me what you gonna do.
6. Tell me what you gonna do.
7. Death is coming after you.
8. You better get your business fixed.
9. Don’t you let it be too late.
10. You’d better make it up in your mind.

APPENDIX 10B: LYRIC SUB-THEMES IN PERFORMANCES OF “SUN IS GOING DOWN”

I: Core line (11 mentions out of 12 performances):
   “Well, the sun is going down.” (all except 1971)
   + continuation of core image (3 mentions out of 12 performances):
   1962 Sign of the Sun: Well, it’s bending mighty low.
   1964 Europe: And it’s bending mighty low.
   1962/67: And the day is drawing nigh.

II: Death (21/12):
   1955/57:
   Don’t you know time is drawing nigh.

   1962 Gerde’s:
   Death is knocking on your door
   You’ve got to go in the ground.
   You’ve got to go right or wrong.
   Death is coming back after you.

   1962 Sign of the Sun:
Don’t you know you got to die.  
 Somebody’s dying every day.  
 Well, your time ain’t long.

1962/67:  
 Now, your time is going in.

1964 Manchester:  
 Yes, your time is gonna end.  
 Don’t you know you got to die.

1966:  
 Well, it’s time to lay your body down.  
 Said your time is out.  
 You got to leave this world behind.

1968/70 I:  
 Says your time is drawing near.  
 Say your time isn’t long.

1968/70 II:  
 Well, your time is drawing near.  
 Well, your time ain’t long.  
 Well, your time is drawing near.  
 Time for you to take a ride.

1971:  
 Death is coming after you.

III:  Need for atonement (14/12):  
 1954:  
 You’d better get your business fixed.

 1955/57:  
 You’d better try to get right.

 1962 Gerde’s:  
 You’d better get your business fixed.

 1962 Sign of the Sun:  
 You’d better get your business fixed.

 1962/65:  
 You’d better get rid of your sin.  
 You better get your work done.
1962/67:
You better get rid of your sin.

1964 Manchester:
You’d better make your business straight.
You’d better get rid of your sin.

1968/70 I:
You better get your business fixed.

1968/70 II:
You better get your business fixed.
You best know right and wrong.

1971:
Well, you better get right.
You better get your business fixed.

IV. Urgency in making up mind (13/12):
1962 Gerde’s:
Ain’t no time to play.

1964 Europe:
Your time is going out.
You might as well make it up in your mind.

1966:
Said you better make it up in your mind.

1968/70 I:
Tell me what you gonna do (x 2)
You better make it up in your mind.

1968/70 II:
Tell me what you gonna do.
You better make it up in your mind.

1971:
Tell me what you gonna do. (x 2)
Don’t you let it be too late.
You’d better make it up in your mind.

V. Acceptance of fate (13/12):
1954:
Tears won’t let nobody stay.
1955/57:
You know you cannot stand.

1962 Gerde’s:
Ain’t no use for you to frown.
Ain’t no use for you to run.
Runnin’ won’t do you no good.

1962/67:
No, you can’t get in.

1964 Manchester:
Don’t you know there’s no need to cry.

1966:
Ain’t no use for you to run.
Ain’t no use for you to frown.
Running won’t do you no good.

1968/70 II:
Tain’t no use for you to run.
Well, it won’t do you no good.
Ain’t no where for you to hide.

VI. House on fire (10/12):
1962 Sign of the Sun:
Well, your house is on fire.

1962/65:
Your house is burning down
Your house is on fire.

1962/67:
And your house is on fire.

1964 Europe:
Sonny, your house is on fire.

1968/70 I:
Well, your house is on fire.

1968/70 II:
Well, your house is on fire.
Well, it’s slowly burning down.
Says your house is on fire.
1971:
Well, your house is burning down.

VII. Fleeing and general sense of displacement (10/12):
1955/57:
You’d better find somewhere to stay.

1962 Sign of the Sun:
You’ve got to go away from here.

1962/65:
Better find somewhere to go.

1962/67:
You better run somewhere and hide.

1964 Europe:
Sonny, you know you can’t stay here.

1966:
You better find somewhere to stay.
Well, it’s hard times now.

1968/70 I:
You can’t live there no more.

1968/70 II:
Yes, it’s coming back after you.
You’d better find you a friend.

VIII: Prayer (8/12):
1954:
You’d better run somewhere and pray.

1962 Gerde’s:
You had better try to pray.

1962/65:
You’d better get somewhere and pray.

1964 Europe:
You’d better go somewhere and pray.

1964 Manchester:
You’d better get somewhere and pray.
1966:
You better go somewhere and pray.

1968/70 I:
You better try to pray.

1971:
You had better try to pray.

IX. Judgment day (6/12):
  1954:
  Judgment day is drawing nigh.

  1964 Manchester:
  Judgment day is drawing near.

  1966:
  Judgment day is drawing nigh.

  1968/70 I:
  Judgment day is drawing nigh.

  1968/70 II:
  Judgment day is drawing nigh.

  1971:
  Judgment day is drawing nigh.

X. God reaching out (6/12):
  1954:
  My God’s calling every day.

  1955/57:
  My God’s calling on every hand.

  1962 Gerde’s:
  My God is coming after you.

  1962 Sign of the Sun:
  My God is calling for you.

  1962/65:
  Don’t you hear God calling you.
  He call your labor reward.
APPENDIX 11. “COCAINE BLUES” LYRICS


I woke up one morning about half past four.  
I heard somebody knocking on my door.  
Cocaine done got all around my brain.

I come in one morning just about half past ten.  
My gal got a chair tried to do her best to knock me in.  
Cocaine got all around my brain.

Found myself sitting on the side of the road.  
I done spent all my money I had for my room and board.  
Cocaine got around my brain.

Run here, mama, won’t you run here quick.  
This cocaine is about to make me sick.  
Cocaine done got all around my brain.

Woke up this morning about half past six.  
My gal done quit, she done had got me fixed.

Been out all night long, I ain’t slept none yet.  
This cocaine has done give me a fit.  
Cocaine has got all around my brain.

Cocaine done got around my brain.  

Look here woman, the way you done me, it ain’t gonna do.  
If you don’t do no better, I’m gonna have to get rid of you.  
Cocaine has got all around my brain.

2. “Cocaine Blues,” on Let Us Get Together (Sonet/Kicking Mule LP SNKF 103, 1974)

(Spoken: A lot of people don’t know what’s a matter with them sometime, you know, ’cause nobody can along with ’em, you know. But I’m here to tell you, cocaine done got all around my brain.)

Come in one night just about half past ten, you know.  
Went to stick my key in the door, and I couldn’t get it in.  
Cocaine has done got all around my brain.
Come in one evening just about half past nine.
My g-, my gal got a chair and tried to knock me blind.
Cocaine has done got all around my brain.

What’s that comin’ yonder lookin’ so red?
My gal is comin’ with a gun wantin’ to kill me dead.
Cocaine has got all around my brain.

I says, “Some-, run here somebody, won’t you please run in a hurry.
This cocaine has got me worried.
Cocaine has got all around my brain.”

Some people don’t know how come they can’t go to bed.
Been out all night long, ain’t slept none yet. This cocaine is giving me a fit.
Cocaine has got all around my brain.

I come in one night, one morning just about half past four.
My gal got a chair, knocked me right on back out the door.
She knows I wasn’t right. Cocaine done got all around my brain.

I said, “Run here, somebody, run here quick.
This cocaine has got me sick.
Cocaine has done got all around my brain.”

Limited Edition Cassettes, 1984)

You know, I woke up this morning just about half past four.
Gal was knockin’ on my door
Sayin’, “Cocaine has done got all around my brain.”

She said, “Go get the doctor and go get him quick.
This cocaine has done made me sick.
Cocaine has got all around my brain.”

Come in late one night, my gal was having fits.
Said, “This cocaine is just about to make me shit.
Cocaine has done got all around my brain.”

She said she been out all night long, ain’t slept none yet.
This cocaine is giving her a terrible fit.
Cocaine done got all around my brain.

Woke up this morning rollin’ all, rollin’ all over my bed.
This cocaine is about to kill me dead.
Cocaine is all around my brain.

Want you to run here, want you to run here in a hurry.
This cocaine is about to make me dirty.
Cocaine has done got all around my brain.”

Got up this morning ready to fight.
This cocaine done put out all my daylight.
Cocaine done got all around my brain.

I can have it on the floor, and I can have it on high.
If I had wings I could begin to fly.
Cocaine done got all around my brain.

4. “Cocaine Blues,” on Demons and Angels: The Ultimate Collection (Shanachie 6117, 2001) and Blues & Ragtime (Shanachie 97024, 1993, abridged)

(Spoken: Now when some people drinks, they drinks they rum. Some drinks homemade wine, you know, some peoples drink gin, you understand. Some folks takes a meal and some folks sniff cocaine. Way back yonder when I was a child, I’d been hearing tell of cocaine ever since I been knowing what, what drinking was. Used to be, they’d tell me, when they’d sniff cocaine, they’d put it on the point of a knife, you understand, and sniff it up their head, you understand – they had the biggest kind of drunk. Now instead they found a better way, you understand, for them to get it, you understand. Sometimes you get it in your vein, they call it now today narcotic. You understand... Well, it’s that same name that they give it, way back yonder, cocaine, but it’s that same narcotic. Sometime we, our brains gets filled up with cocaine and they ain’t, ain’t had took nary a sniff. Sometime you get tied up in love, you understand, you got cocaine aplenty, don’t have to snuff none. Ain’t that right?)

I hear a boy say, “I’m goin’ uptown, I’m gonna hurry back.”
He said, “My baby’s got something I sure do like.” “What is it?”
He said, “Cocaine gettin’ all around my brain.”

Said, “See that woman comin’ yonder dressed in black?” “What’s the matter?”
“I believe to my soul she’s gonna take me back.”
Cocaine all around my brain.

Here’s somebody draggin’, can’t hardly make it.
Said, “You oughta been dead a long time ago snuffin’ cocaine up the head.”
Cocaine all around my brain.

Here come a man with a pretty girl.
Talkin’ about your good gal, you oughta see mine.
She ain’t so pretty but she do dress fine.
Cocaine.

Here’s a fellow done got too much of it and about to kill him. He said, “Run here baby, please ma’am, run here quick. This cocaine is just about to make me sick.”
Cocaine.

That’s one of them old-time playing, you see?

One of these mornings, it won’t be long, You’re gonna wake up and call for me and I’ll be gone – wants to get something now. Cocaine has done got around my brain.

Here come a high ta-, a tall person. All you people ought to be like me. Drink that good corn whiskey and let the cocaine be. Cocaine.

That fellow got some sense. And he wants something to do him good, not to kill him, you see.


(Spoken: I’m gonna play you all what you want now.)

John’s been dead long time ago. Snuffling this cocaine, he won’t snuff along no more. Cocaine done got all around my brain.

Come in one morning just about broad daylight. Me and my gal had a great big fight. Cocaine done got all around my brain.

Got up this morning about half past nine. My gal got a chair and tried her best to knock me blind. Cocaine done got all around my brain.

Send for the doctor and send for him quick. This cocaine has done made me sick. Cocaine done got all around my brain.

Run here woman, won’t you run here quick. This cocaine has done made me sick. Cocaine done got all around my brain.
Run here please, baby, won’t you run here quick.
This cocaine is getting me worried.
Cocaine done got all around my brain.

I’ve been out all night long, ain’t slept none yet.
This cocaine is giving me a terrible fit.
Cocaine has got all around my brain.

Come in home, I didn’t know hardly how to act.
My gal stuck me in the head with a seven-pound ax.
Cocaine done got all around my brain.

Met my gal comin’, she’s all dressed in red.
She had a .38 special to kill me dead.
Cocaine done got all around my brain.

Woke up this morning feelin’ bad.
Worst ol’ feelin’ I ever most had.
Cocaine done got all around my brain.

What you talkin’ ’bout?
I tell you men, you just ought to be like me.
Drink good corn whiskey and let that ol’ cocaine be.
Cocaine done got all around my brain.

I found myself sittin’ down on, on some lonesome road.
Sick with myself, I done spent all my money for room and board.
Cocaine done got all around my brain.

Pretty bad when a man is spendin’ money like that, you know.
APPENDIX 12. LIST OF REVEREND GARY DAVIS SONGS COMMERCIALY RELEASED BY STEFAN GROSSMAN (* = songs/performances unique to these recordings)

Secular (66 performances/49 songs, 18 unique)
*1 “All Night Long” (1962/65)
  1 “Baby, Let Me Lay It On You” (1968)
*1 “Bill Bailey” (1962/63)
  1 “Birmingham Special” (1968)
*1 “Blues in A” (1963)
*1 “Blues in E” (1962)
  1 “Buck Dance” (1962)
  6 “Candy Man” (1962 x 3, 1962/67H x 3)
  1 “Cincinnati Flow Rag” (1962/70)
  3 “Cocaine Blues” (1962, 1962/65, 1963/64)
  1 “Come Down and See Me Sometime” (1962)
*2 “C-Rag” (1962/67 X 2)
*1 “Darktown Strutters’ Ball” (1962/70)
  1 “Devil’s Dream” (1962/65)
  1 “Don’t Let My Baby Catch You Here” (1962/63)
  1 “Fast Fox Trot” (as “Buck Dance,” 1962/70)
  3 “Fox Chase” (also as “Oh Lord,” 1962 x 2, 1962/67H)
*1 “Georgia Camp Meeting” (1963)
*1 “Goin’ To Chattanooga” (1962/67)
  1 “Hard Walking Blues” (as “Swingin’ Blues,” 1962/70)
*1 “Honey, Get Your Towel Wet” (1962/63)
*1 “I Got a Gal Crazy About Me (She’s Funny That Way)” (Fuller song, 1962/67)
  1 “Italian Rag” (1962/70)
  1 “Lost John” (1968)
  1 “Maple Leaf Rag” (a s“Make Believe Stunt,” 1962/70)
  2 “Mountain Jack” (as “Please Judy” and “Silvie,” 1968 x 2)
  1 “Nobody Don’t Care For Me (1962/67)
  1 “Piece Without Words” (1962)
*1 “Raise A Ruckus Tonight” (1962/67)
*1 “Saddle It Around” (1962/67)
  1 “Sally, Where’d You Get Your Liquor From?
*1 “St. Louis Tickle” (1962/70)
  1 “Save Up Your Money, John D. Rockefeller Put the Panic On” (1962/67)
  2 “She Wouldn’t Say Quit” (1962, 1962/63)
  1 “She’s Funny That Way” (1968)
  1 “Slippin’ ’Til My Gal Comes in, Partner” (1962)
  1 “Spoonful” (1962/65)
*1 “Sportin’ Life Blues” (1963)
1 “Tesse” (1962)
4 “Twelve Sticks” (also as “The Boy Was Kissing the Girl,” 1962, 1962-67, 1968 x 2)
1 “Walkin’ Dog Blues” (1962/70)
1 “Wall Hollow Blues” (also as “Blues in C,” 1962, 1962/67)
1 “West Coast Blues” (1962/70)
1 “Whistlin’ Blues” (1962/65)
1 “Whoopin’ Blues” (1962/66)
1 “You Cry Because I’m Leaving” (1962/67)
1 “You’re Goin’ Quit Me Baby” (1963)

Sacred (76 performances/55 songs, 25 unique – 4 w/Suzy Dews, v)
1 “Amazing Grace” (1962/67)
1 “Babylon Is Falling” (1962)
2 “Blow Gabriel” (1962, 1962/65)
1 “Calvary” (1962/67)
1 “Can’t Make This Journey By Myself” (1962/67)
2 “Children of Zion” (1962, 1962/67)
2 “Death Don’t Have No Mercy” (1962, 1963/64)
1 “Get Right Church” (1962)
1 “God Be With You” (1962/67)
1 “God’s Gonna Separate” (1962)
1 “I Am a Pilgrim” (1962)
1 “I Am a True Vine” (1963)
1 “I’m a Soldier in the Army of the Lord” (1962/67)
2 “I Want to Be Saved” (1962, 1962-67)
1 “I Will Overcome Someday” (1962/67)
1 “I’ll Fly Away” (1962)
1 “I’m Going Back To Jesus” (Suzy Dews, v, 1962)
2 “Jesus Met the Woman at the Well” (1962, 1962/65)
1 “Just a Closer Walk with Thee” (1962)
2 “Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning” (1964, 1968)
3 “Let Us Get Together” (1962/65, 1963/64, 1964)
2 “Lo, I Be with You Always” (1962, 1968)
1 “Lord, I Feel Just Like Goin’ On” (1962/67)
1 “Lord, I Won’t Go Back in Sin” (C) (1962)
1 “Lord, On Your Word” (1962/65)
1 “Lord, Stand By Me” (1963)
1 “Lord, Let Me Live Longer” (Suzy Dews, v, 1962)
1 “Mean Old World” (1963)
1 “Moon Is Going Down” (1963)
2 “Oh Glory, How Happy I Am” (1962, 1963/64)
1 “Packing Up, Get Ready To Go” (1962/67)
2 “People That Use to See Can’t See No More” (also as “People Who Use to See,” 1962, 1962/67)
1 Right or Wrong (harp, 1962)
3 “Samson and Delilah” (1962, 1964, 1968)
1 “Say No to the Devil” (1962)
2 “Soon My Work Will All Be Done” (1962, 1962/67)
*1 “Steal Away” (1962/67)
*1 “Steal Away And Pray” (1962/67)
*1 “Thank You Jesus” (1962)
2 “There’s Destruction in This Land” (1962, 1964)
*1 “Time Ain’t So Long” (1968)
*1 “Tired, My Soul Needs a Restin’” (Suzy Dews, v, 1963)
1 “Trying to Get to Heaven” (1962)
1 “Twelve Gates to the City” (1968)
1 “Uncloudy Day, The” (as “Lord They Tell Me,” 1962)
*1 “Virgin Mary” (1962/63)
*1 “What Could I Do” (Suzy Dews, v, 1962)
1 “When the Train Comes Along (Meet You at the Station)” (1962)
2 “Who Shall Deliver Poor Me” (also as “All Night Long,” 1962, 1962/65)
*1 “Won’t You Hush” (1963)
*1 “Working on the Building” (1962)
2 “You Got to Move” (1962, 1964)
*1 “You’re Gonna Need King Jesus” (1962/67)
APPENDIX 13a. LIST OF UNRELEASED REVEREND GARY DAVIS SONGS
RECORDED BY ERNIE HAWKINS, ca. 1968/70, PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA
(* = songs/performances unique to these recordings)

Secular (82 performances/50 different tunes, 23 unique)
1 “Aggravatin’ Papa”
8 “Buck Rag”
*1 “Bye Bye Blackbird”
2 “Candyman”
*1 “Chicken, You Can’t Roost Too High for Me”
8 “Cincinnati Flow Rag”
2 “Cocaine Blues”
1 “Come Down and See Me Sometime”
1 “Darktown Strutter’s Ball”
1 “Devil’s Dream”
*1 “Dill Pickles Rag”
1 “Don’t Let My Baby Catch You Here”
*1 “Florida Blues”
1 “Hard Walking Blues”
2 “Hesitation Blues”
2 “Ice Pick Blues”
*1 “I Wonder What’s Become of Sally”
*1 “Let’s Go Down to Betty’s”
1 “Little Boy, Little Boy, Who Made Your Britches?”
1 “Lost Boy in the Wilderness”
1 “Mama, Let Me Lay It on You”
5 “Maple Leaf Rag”
*1 “Masters of War”
*1 “Mean to Me”
3 “Mountain Jack”
2 “Nobody Cares for Me”
*1 “Old Fashioned Love”
*1 “Penitentiary Blues”
1 “Piece without Words”
*1 “Pray for the Lights to Go Out”
*2 “St. James Infirmary”
*1 “St Louis Blues”
2 “Sally, Where’d You Get Your Liquor?”
1 “Save Up Your Money, John D. Rockefeller Put the Panic On”
1 “She Wouldn’t Say Quit”
1 “Soldier’s Drill”
*1 “Stormy Weather”
3 “Talk on the Corner”
*1 “That’ll Never Happen No More”
*1 “Tie Me to Your Apron Strings Again”
2 “Twelve Sticks”
*1 Unidentified instrumental in C
*1 Unidentified instrumental in G
2 “Walking Dog Blues”
*1 “Walkin’ the Dog”
2 “Wall Hollow Blues”
*1 “Wedding March”
*1 “Yes Sir, That’s My Baby”
*1 “You Belong to Me”
*1 “You Want a Good Man, Treat a Good Man Right”

Sacred (36 performances/28 different tunes, 5 unique)
1 “Blow Gabriel”
2 “Children of Zion”
*1 “Come on Brother, Let’s Go Round the Wall”
1 “Crucifixion”
1 “Don’t Move My Bed Till the Holy Ghost Come”
1 “God’s Gonna Separate”
1 “Great Change Since I’ve Been Born”
1 “Have a Little More Faith”
1 “I Am the Light of the World”
1 “I Belong to the Band”
1 “I Cannot Bear My Burden by Myself”
2 “I Heard the Angels Singing”
1 “I Will Do My Last Singing”
1 “I’m Going to Sit on the Banks of the River”
*1 “It’s a Highway to Heaven”
1 “Joy to Know Him”
2 “Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning”
2 “Oh Glory, How Happy I Am”
1 “Oh Lord, Search My Heart”
*1 “Old Ship of Zion, The”*
1 “Samson and Delilah”
1 “Say No to the Devil”
*2 “See What the Lord Has Done for Me”
2 “Soon My Work Will All Be Done”
2 “Sun Is Going Down”
2 “There’s Destruction in This Land”
*1 “‘Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus”
1 “Twelve Gates to the City”
APPENDIX 13b: PRIVATE TAPE LIST OF REVEREND GARY DAVIS
PERFORMANCES RECORDED BY ERNIE HAWKINS, ca. 1968/70, PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA

Tape 1, side A:
1. “Hard Walking Blues”
2. “Dill Pickles Rag”
3. “Maple Leaf Rag”
4. “Florida Blues”
5. “Cincinnati Flow Rag”
6. “Buck Rag”
7. “Talk on the Corner”
8. “Hesitation Blues”

Tape 1, side B:
1. “Bye Bye Blackbird”
2. “Penitentiary Blues”
3. “Twelve Sticks”
4. “St. James Infirmary”
5. “Darktown Strutter’s Ball”
6. “Devil’s Dream”
7. “Cocaine Blues”
8. “Buck Rag”
9. “I Heard the Angels Singing”
10. “Wall Hollow Blues”
11. “Children of Zion”
12. “Oh Glory, How Happy I Am”

Tape 2, side A:
1. “Tie Me to Your Apron Strings Again”
2. “Lost Boy in the Wilderness”
3. “Twelve Sticks”
4. “Sun Is Going Down”
5. “Twelve Gates to the City”
6. “Wall Hollow Blues”
7. “Yes Sir, That’s My Baby”
8. “Cincinnati Flow Rag”
9. “Mountain Jack” improvisation
10. “Cocaine”
11. “Maple Leaf Rag”
12. “’Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus”

Tape 2, side B:
1. “I’m Going to Sit on the Banks of the River”

1Duplicate song titles are not listed in the few cases where the same performance shows up on more than one tape.
2. “I Belong to the Band”
3. “God’s Gonna Separate”
4. “Blow Gabriel”
5. “Come on Brother, Let’s Go Round the Wall”

Tape 3, side A:
1. “Joy to Know Him”
2. “Talk on the Corner”
3. “Maple Leaf Rag”
4. “Samson and Delilah”
5. “Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning” (partial)

Tape 3, side B:
1. Unidentified instrumental in G
2. “St. James Infirmary”
3. “Ice Pick Blues”
4. “Piece without Words”
5. “Let’s Go Down to Betty’s”
6. “She Wouldn’t Say Quit”
7. “Buck Rag”
8. “Sally, Where’d You Get Your Liquor?”
9. “Cincinnati Flow Rag”

Tape 4, side A:
1. “Sun is Going Down”
2. “Walking Dog Blues”
3. “You Belong to Me”
4. “Nobody Cares for Me”
5. “Say No to the Devil”
6. “Wedding March”
7. “Cincinnati Flow Rag”
8. “Maple Leaf Rag”

Tape 4, side B:
1. “Great Change Since I’ve Been Born”
2. “Mountain Jack” improvisation
3. “Walking Dog Blues”
4. “Ice Pick Blues” improvisation

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2 Though unidentified, this musical idea is similar enough to Davis’s other version of “St. James Infirmary” to be considered a set of variations on the idea – something with which Ernie Hawkins agrees – and has been considered as much in my summation of his repertoire.

3 This is the same unidentified twelve-bar blues in C that Stefan Grossman recorded as “Piece without Words,” and is thus titled here as well.

4 Though not exactly “Ice Pick Blues,” this blues in E has enough in common with the frequently played number by Davis to be considered a musing or “meditation” (to paraphrase Ernie Hawkins) on it.
5. “Buck Rag”

**Tape 5, side A:**
1. “Children of Zion”
2. “There’s Destruction in This Land”
3. “Cincinnati Flow Rag”
4. “There’s Destruction in This Land”
5. “Soon My Work Will All Be Done”
6. “Oh Glory, How Happy I Am”
7. “It’s a Highway to Heaven”
8. “See What the Lord Has Done for Me”

**Tape 5, side B:**
1. “Save Up Your Money, John D. Rockefeller Put the Panic On”
2. “The Old Ship of Zion”
3. “See What the Lord Has Done for Me”
4. “Talk on the Corner”
5. “Cincinnati Flow Rag”
6. “Oh Lord, Search My Heart”
7. “I Am the Light of the World”

**Tape 6, side A:**
1. “St Louis Blues”
2. “That’ll Never Happen No More”
3. “Mama, Let Me Lay It on You”
4. “Chicken, You Can’t Roost Too High for Me”
5. “Cincinnati Flow Rag”
6. “Buck Rag”
7. “Come Down and See Me Sometime”
8. “Candyman”

**Tape 6, side B:**
1. “Have a Little More Faith”
2. “I Cannot Bear My Burden by Myself”
3. “Don’t Let My Baby Catch You Here”
5. “I Wonder What’s Become of Sally”
6. “Buck Rag”
7. “Hesitation Blues”

**Tape 7, side A:**
1. “I Will Do My Last Singing”
2. “Soon My Work Will All Be Done”
3. “Crucifixion”
4. “Sally, Where’d You Get Your Liquor From?”
Tape 7, side B:
1. “Buck Rag”
2. “Maple Leaf Rag”
3. “Masters of War”
4. “Cincinnati Flow Rag”
5. “Candyman”
6. “Mountain Jack” improvisation
7. “I Heard the Angels Singing”
8. “Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning”

Tape 8, side A:
1. “Don’t Move My Bed Till the Holy Ghost Come”
2. “Buck Rag”

Tape 8, side B:
1. “Nobody Cares for Me”
2. “Soldier’s Drill”
3. “Walkin’ the Dog”
4. “Pray for the Lights to Go Out”
5. Unidentified instrumental in C
6. “Mean to Me”
7. “You Want a Good Man, Treat a Good Man Right”
8. “Aggravatin’ Papa”
9. “Old Fashioned Love”
10. “Stormy Weather”
APPENDIX 14: SONGS PERFORMED BY REVEREND GARY DAVIS ON PRIVATE TAPES MADE BY VARIOUS MICHIGAN-BASED FANS AND STUDENTS (* = songs/distinct performances unique to these recordings)

CD 1. Gary Davis at Rick Ruskin’s parents house, Detroit, ca. 1964 (31:50)
1. “When I Die I’ll Live Again”
2. “Cincinnati Flow Rag”
3. “Maple Leaf Rag”
4. “Walking Dog Blues”

CD 2. Gary Davis at Rick Ruskin’s parents house, Detroit, ca. 1964 (31:41)
2. “Candyman”
3. “Children of Zion”
4. “If I Had My Way”
5. “Talk on the Corner”

CD 3. Gary Davis at Rick Ruskin’s, Detroit, ca. 1969 (57:46)
1. “Cincinnati Flow Rag”

CD 4. Gary Davis at Dick Meltzer’s, Detroit, ca. 1964 (46:25)
1. “Oh Glory”
2. “Little More Faith”
3. “I Told Jesus He Could Bear My Burden”
4. “Nobody Cares for Me”
5. “Soon My Work Will All Be Done”
6. “Candyman”

CD 5. Gary Davis at Rowena Reik’s house, Pontiac, Michigan, ca. 1969 (52:22)
1. “Mountain Jack”-like 12-bar blues improvisation with spontaneous lyrics
2. “Hesitation Blues”
*4. “Rocking Chair Blues”
*5. Talking Blues in E

CD 6. Gary Davis at Rowena Reik’s house, Pontiac, Michigan, ca. 1969 (40:49)
1. “Nobody Cares For Me”
2. “Let Us Get Together”
3. “I Will Do My Last Singing”
4. “Oh Glory”

These performances became known to me via compact disc transfer and have been identified according to each CD’s original numbering system. Not listed is CD 9, which consists of music performed by Rowena Reik. Shared courtesy of the collection of Andy Cohen.

2A frequent song in his repertoire, Davis refers to it here as “Mister Stovepipe.”

3Title given by author from first stanza.
5. “Rabbit and the Baboon”
6. “Candyman”

CD 7. Gary Davis at Rowena Reik’s house, Pontiac, Michigan, ca. 1969 (39:52)
1. “Delia”
2. “Mountain Jack”-like blues improvisation
3. “Walking Dog Blues”
4. “Hesitation Blues”
5. “She’s Just Funny That Way” (partial)

CD 8. Gary Davis at Rick Ruskin’s, Detroit, ca. 1969 (42:18)
1. “God’s Gonna Separate”
2. “I Am the True Vine”
3. “Crucifixion”

CD 10. Gary Davis, unknown location/date (36:22)
*1. “Rabbit and the Baboon”
2. “Little Bitty Baby”
3. “Buck Rag”
4. “Delia”
5. Blues in C (partial)
6. Brief riffing on “Talk on the Corner”

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*Song title given by author from first line.*
APPENDIX 15. VIOLENT BEHAVIOR + GUNS AS A SUBSET IN THE SECULAR SONGS OF REVEREND GARY DAVIS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song</th>
<th>#vocal perf.</th>
<th>#violence</th>
<th>#guns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. “All Night Long”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. “Baby What You Going to Do”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. “Candy Man”</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. “Chicken, You Can’t Roost Too High for Me”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. “Cocaine Blues”</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. “Come Down to See Me Sometime”</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. “Cross and Evil Woman Blues”</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. “Delia”</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. “Don’t Let My Baby Catch You Here”</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. “Eagle Rocking Blues”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. “Get Along Cindy”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. “Hesitation Blues”</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. “I’m So Tired of Being Alone”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. “I’m Throwing Up My Hands”</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. “Kitty Went A-Courting”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. “Let’s Go Down to Betty’s”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. “Little Boy, Little Boy, Who Made Your Britches?”</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. “Mama, Let Me Lay It on You”</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. “Nobody Cares for Me”</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. “Rabbit and the Baboon”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>22. “Raise a Ruckus Tonight”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>23. “Rocking Chair Blues”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>24. “Saddle It Around”</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>25. “Sally, Where’d You Get Your Liquor From”</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. “Save Up Your Money, John D. Rockefeller Put the Panic On”</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. “She Wouldn’t Say Quit”</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. “Soldier’s Drill”</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. “Spoonful”</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. “Square Dance Verses”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>31. “Talk on the Corner”</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>32. Talking Blues in E</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. “Tesse”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. “Whistlin’ Blues”</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35. “You’re Goin’ to Quit Me, Baby”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1Though an instrumental, “Soldier’s Drill” contains many spoken asides and programmatic moments about shooting and is thus relevant to this chart (only performances with vocal gestures, however, have been considered).
### APPENDIX 16. VISUAL REFERENCES IN THE 1935 SESSIONS OF REVEREND GARY DAVIS

**Song** | **Visual References (#)**
---|---
1. “I’m Throwing Up My Hands” | Lord, Lord, see what a fix she left me in (1)
2. “Cross and Evil Woman Blues” | Why you treat me just like I was some man has never been seen
When you find a woman wake up in the morning with a rag towel around her head
All she want a shotgun or razor, ice pick, or piece of pistol she can find (3)
3. “I Am the True Vine” | I am the one that seek the vine (1)
4. “I Am the Light of the World” | I am the light of this world
I got fiery fingers, I got fiery hands
And the angels done signed my name (3)
5. “O Lord, Search My Heart” | None
6. “You Can Go Home” | None
7. “Twelve Gates to the City” | Oh what a beautiful city
Twelve gates to the city
And there’s three gates in the east, three gates in the west, three gates in the north, three gates in the south (3)
8. “Have More Faith in Jesus” | Heard a little voice and I saw no one (1)
9. “You Got to Go Down” | None
10. “I Belong to the Band – Hallelujah!” | Ask my Lord for a starry crown (1)
11. “The Great Change in Me” | People that I used to could see, I don’t see ’em no more (1)
12. “Lord, I Wish I Could See” | It was a time when I went blind
Was the darkest day that I ever saw
Am I to be blind always?
Lord, I wished I could see again
If I could see, how happy I would be
At the trouble I do see
I’m away in the dark, got to feel my way
Lord, it’s hard I have to be blind
Since I lost my sight, I lost my friends
Lord, I’m blind, I cannot see
Was a dreadful day that I ever seen
You all ought to realize that you got your good sight
You can see! It’s true
You can see everything coming to you (14 – 6 sight/8 blindness)
| 13. “Lord, Stand By Me” | I look towards the sky  
Command the sun to go out  
Command the stars to fall  
You can look toward the sky and cry | (4) |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| 14. “The Angel’s Message to Me” | I’m goin’ home to see my Jesus  
I’m goin’ home to see my Lord | (2) |
APPENDIX 17. VISUAL REFERENCES IN THE SECULAR SONGS OF REVEREND GARY DAVIS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song (Date)</th>
<th>Visual References (#)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. “All Night Long” (1962/65)</td>
<td>I begin to peep through the key crack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I found another man was in my stall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Well, a yellow gal she uses, uh, good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>smellin’ clothes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>And a brownskin do the same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black gal, she use a good-sweet soap                      (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. “Baby, What You Going to Do” (1958/59)</td>
<td>Trying to find my baby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can’t find her here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can’t find nobody here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 “Candy Man” (1955/57)</td>
<td>Run and get the pitcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Big-leg Ida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 “Candy Man” (1957)</td>
<td>Big-leg Ida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I love that big-leg gal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You can’t be my fattening hog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Run and get the pitcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 “Candyman” (1962)</td>
<td>Can’t be my fattening hog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Run and get the bucket</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 “Candyman” (1962)</td>
<td>Candy man, fattening hog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Run and get the pitcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 “Candyman” (1962)</td>
<td>Candy man, fattening hog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Big-leg Ida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I love that big-leg gal of mine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Run and get the pitcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6 “Candyman” (1962/67)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7 “Candyman” (1964)</td>
<td>Run and get the bucket</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8 “Candy Man” (1966)</td>
<td>Big-leg Ida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I love that big-leg gal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You can’t be my fattening hog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Run and get the pitcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.9 “Candy Man” (1966)</td>
<td>Run and get the pitcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.10 “Candy Man” (1968/70)</td>
<td>Run and get the pitcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.11 “Candy Man” (1968/70)</td>
<td>Candy man, fattening hog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Run and get the pitcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.12 “Candy Man” (1970)</td>
<td>Run and get the pitcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. “Chicken, You Can’t Roost Too High for Me”</td>
<td>Chicken make the sky all brown                           (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 “Cocaine Blues” (1962)</td>
<td>I woke up this morning just about half past four</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Want you to run here in a hurry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This cocaine done put out all my daylight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 “Cocaine Blues” (1962/65)</td>
<td>Said, “See that woman comin’ yonder</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

770
| 771 | dressed in black?”
| Here come a man with a pretty girl
| Talkin’ about your good gal, you ought see mine
| She ain’t so pretty but she do dress fine
| He said, “Run here baby, please ma’am, run here quick”
| Here come a high, ta-, a tall person |
| 5.3 “Cocaine Blues” (1963/64) | Come in one night just about half past ten
| Come in one evening just about half past nine
| My gal got a chair and tried to knock me blind
| What’s that comin’ yonder lookin’ so red?
| I says, “Some-, run here somebody, won’t you please run in a hurry”
| I come in one night, one morning just about half past four |
| 5.4 “Cocaine Blues” (1964) | Got up this morning about half past nine
| My gal got a chair and tried her best to knock me blind
| Run here woman, won’t you run here quick
| Met my gal comin’, she’s all dressed in red |
| 5.5 “Cocaine Blues” (1971) | I woke up one morning about half past four
| I come in one morning just about half past ten
| Run here, mama, won’t you run here quick
| Woke up this morning about half past six |
| 6.1 “Come Down to See Me Sometime” (1956/57) | Come down to see me sometime
| Thought he’d come to see me
| I had a little bag and it was gold |
| 6.2 “Come Down and See Me Sometime” (1962) | Come down to see me sometime
| My papa he had a old gray horse
| Every time she sees a looking glass
| The white man shook his big money sack
| Well, I had a little bag, it was gold
| I had to peek through the key crack
| A yellow girl use this nice sweet soap
| Brown skin she do the same
| Black gal gets this old Red Devil Lye
| She was looking so nice and neat
| I find Dinah lying in the bed
| I was goin’ down in town in my car |
| 6.3 “Come Down and See Me Sometime” | Come down to see me sometime |
| (1962)                                                                 | A yellow girl sleeps in a brass iron bed  
|                                                                     | Brown skin do the same  
|                                                                     | A black girl makes a palette on the floor  
|                                                                     | Well, I had a little bag and it was gold  
|                                                                     | I found her lyin’ in the bed  
|                                                                     | I asked her to take a ride  
|                                                                     | I saw her comin’ down the street one day  
| 6.4 “Come Down to See Me Sometime”                                   | Come down to see me sometime  
| (1968/70)                                                            | My mother she had a old gray horse  
|                                                                     | A yellow girl sleeps in a brass iron bed  
|                                                                     | A brown skin do the same  
|                                                                     | Black gal she build a bunk upside the wall  
|                                                                     | Went down to Dinah’s house one day to see her  
|                                                                     | I was goin’ down to town with my car  
|                                                                     | Dinah come up the street looking so sweet  
| 6.5 “Come Down to See Me Sometime”                                   | Come down to see me sometime  
| (1970)                                                               | My father he had a old gray horse  
|                                                                     | Thought he just come to see me  
|                                                                     | I got me a choke-barreled shotgun, I give  
|                                                                     | Brother Rabbit hell  
|                                                                     | A yellow girl use this here white bar of soap  
|                                                                     | Brown skin do the same  
|                                                                     | Black gal use this ol’ Red Devil lye soap  
|                                                                     | I was going downtown one day in my car  
|                                                                     | Dinah come down the street looking so nice and good  
| 7.1 “Cross and Evil Woman Blues” (1935)                               | Why you treat me just like I was some man has never been seen  
|                                                                     | When you find a woman wake up in the morning with a rag towel around her head  
|                                                                     | All she want a shotgun or razor, ice pick, or piece of pistol she can find  
| 7.2 “Cross and Evil Woman Blues” (1958/59)                            | First thing she want is a shotgun or razor, old piece of pistol she can find  
|                                                                     | I wished I had never seen you  
| 8.1 “Delia” (1969)                                                   | Was looking around in the newspaper  
|                                                                     | That telegram boy with a telegram, he handed it to me, I read it, and it, it read my Delia was dead  
|                                                                     | Looked down on Delia’s grave  
|                                                                     | She found her pigs all dead  
| (8)                                                                 | (8)  
| (11)                                                                | (3)  
| (2)                                                                 | (2)  

| 8.2 “Delia” (1970) | For I’m gonna run this doggone engine in some ol’ doggone lonesome hole (5) |
| 9.1 “Don’t Let My Baby Catch You Here” (1962/67) | She found her pigs all dead  
I’m gonna run this engine in some doggone lonesome hole (2) |
| 9.2 “Don’t Let My Baby Catch You Here” (1968/70) | Don’t let my baby catch you here  
I’d give all the good-lookin’ women  
Drink down your blood just like wine (3) |
| 10. “Eagle Rocking Blues” | Got my mind all troubled like the waters on the deep blue sea (1) |
| 11. “Get Along Cindy” | Don’t let my baby catch you here  
Drink down your blood just like wine (2) |
| 12.1 “Hesitation Blues” (1962/67) | I woke up this mornin’ just about half past four  
I was looking for the first woman that ain’t got no man  
Eagle on the dollar saying, “In God We Trust” (3) |
| 12.2 “Hesitation Blues” (1968) | I woke up this morning about half past four  
Eagle on the dollar says, “In God We Trust”  
But I can keep a few books for you till your bookkeeper comes  
You look alright, too  
But I can do a little driving till your chauffeur comes  
The blacker the berry and the sweeter the juice  
I ain’t gonna wear no black  
Just show me a woman that a man can trust (7) |
| 12.3 “Hesitation Blues” (1969) | I woke up this morning about half past four  
But I can do a little driving for you till your chauffeur comes  
The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice  
I got to go find me a woman somewhere  
Eagle on the dollar says, “In God We Trust”  
I believe my man got a black cat bone  
Just show me a woman that a man can trust (7) |
| 12.4 “Hesitation Blues” (1969) | I woke up this morning about half past four  
I was looking for the first woman come |
<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12.5 “Hesitation Blues” (1971)</td>
<td>along that didn’t have no man I got to go find me a woman somewhere I got me two nice-looking women sing the “Hesitation Blues” Now when you see me coming, honey Eagle on the dollar says, “In God We Trust”</td>
<td>(6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. “I’m So Tired of Being All Alone” (1958/59)</td>
<td>I woke up this morning you know just about half past four I was looking for the first woman that come along didn’t have no man</td>
<td>(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.1 “I’m Throwin’ Up My Hands” (1935)</td>
<td>I’m waitin’ for you and don’t see you</td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.2 “I’m Throwing Up My Hands” (1958/59)</td>
<td>Lord, Lord, see what a fix she left me in</td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.3 “Mountain Jack” (a.k.a., “I’m Throwin’ Up My Hands” (1969)</td>
<td>When she see me comin’ in</td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary” (1962)</td>
<td>Saw my gal one day coming down the street with another man</td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. “Kitty Went a-Courting” (1962)</td>
<td>Good God, boy, you see what’s happenin’? Well, he start to shootin’ Said the people start to runnin’ Some run in the kitchen Some run in, in the closet Some run cross the field</td>
<td>(6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. “Let’s Go Down to Betty’s” (1968/70)</td>
<td>Mammy sewed the stitches Keep on sewing, mama Gal and the boy went to chinquapin hunting Gal fell down and the boy kept on hunting</td>
<td>(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.3 “Little Boy, Little Boy, Who Made Your Britches?” (1962/65)</td>
<td>Mammy sewed the stitches Sew on, mama Gal and the boy went to chinquapin hunting Gal fell down and the boy kept on hunting Hunt on, boy She was cleaning up the floor She saw me with another gal You ought to see the shakin’ You ought to seen the hunchin’</td>
<td>(9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.3 “Little Boy Who Made Your Britches” (1962/67)</td>
<td>Mammy sewed the stitches Gal and the boy went to chinquapin hunting</td>
<td>(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.3 “Little Boy, Little Boy, Who Made Your Britches?” (1968/70)</td>
<td>Mammy sewed the stitches Gal and the boy went to chinquapin hunting</td>
<td>(4)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>“Mama, Let Me Lay It on You” (as “Baby, Let Me Lay It on You,” 1968)</td>
<td>She saw me with another gal (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>“Mama, Let Me Lay It on You” (1968/70)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>“Mama, Let Me Lay It on You” (1971)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>“Nobody Cares for Me” (1958/59)</td>
<td>She have turned her back on me (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>“Nobody Don’t Care for Me” (1962/67)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>“Nobody Cares for Me” (1964)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>“Nobody Cares for Me” (1968/70)</td>
<td>Have turned her back on me (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>“Nobody Cares for Me” (1968/70)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>“Nobody Cares for Me” (1969)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>“Rabbit and the Baboon” (1964)</td>
<td>Rabbit looked up Counting up the money that we haven’t made (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>“Raise a Ruckus Tonight” (19062/67)</td>
<td>Where the moon is shining bright Well, two little men black as tar Never seen so many join the church before (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>“Rockin’ Chair Blues” (ca. 1969)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>“Saddle It Around” (1962/67)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>“Sally, Where’d You Get Your Liquor From” (as “Old Drunken Sally,” 1962)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>“Sally, Where’d You Get Your Liquor From” (1962)</td>
<td>Come in drunk staggering (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>“Sally, Where’d You Get Your Liquor From” (1962/67)</td>
<td>Ah, you staggering (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>“Sally, Where’d You Get Your Liquor From” (1967)</td>
<td>Ah yeah, you staggering (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>“Sally, Where’d You Get Your Liquor From” (1968/70)</td>
<td>Yeah, you staggering Trying to find another drunk (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>“Sally” (1970)</td>
<td>Come in one day just about half past four Looking for another drunk (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>“Sally, Where’d You Get Your Whiskey From” (1971)</td>
<td>I come in one evening about half past four Tryin’ to find another drunk (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>“Save Up Your Money, John D. Rockefeller Put the Panic On” (1958/59)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>“Save Up Your Money, John D. Rockefeller Put the Panic On” (1968/70)</td>
<td>I had me a long tall girl (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>“She Wouldn’t Say Quit” (1962)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>“She Wouldn’t Say Quit” (1965)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Lyrics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>“She Wouldn’t Say Quit” (1967)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>“She Wouldn’t Say Quit” (1968/70)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>“She Wouldn’t Say Quit” (1970)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>“Spoonful” (1962/65)</td>
<td>I come in one morning to my gal’s house about half past four</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I come in one morning just about half past nine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Come in one night just about half past ten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>“Lovin’ Spoonful” (1965)</td>
<td>I come in one morning to my gal’s house about half past four</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I come in one morning just about half past nine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Come in one night just about half past ten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>“Spoonful” (1970)</td>
<td>I come in one night just about half past nine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I never seen a woman like her before in my life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>“Square Dance Verses” (1958/59)</td>
<td>Well, I went down to the hog-eyed town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I ate so much of that hog-eyed meat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Well, little girl sittin’ in a diamond chair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>And choose the one that’s pretty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Choose the one with coal black eyes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>“Talk on the Corner” (as “I Got A</td>
<td>But if you get her cross, boy, she’ll put out your light</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Little Mama, Sweet As She Can Be,”</td>
<td>And she come back and can’t find him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1964)</td>
<td>She’s a nice gal, a good teasin’ brown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>“Talk on the Corner” (as “She Just Put</td>
<td>When she go to look for him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It That Way,” 1966)</td>
<td>When she nice and made up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Look for you and can’t find you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>She the kind of gal, boy, she not hard to find</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>“Talk on the Corner” (as “She’s Funny That</td>
<td>She come in sometime with her face full of frown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Way,” 1968)</td>
<td>No further than her eyes can see</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Look for you and can’t find you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>“Talk on the Corner” (1968/70)</td>
<td>She’ll do her best to put out your light</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Any further than her eyes can see</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Look for him and can’t find him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>She’s a nice-lookin’ gal, boy, she’s nice, plump and fine and fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>“Talk on the Corner” (1968/70)</td>
<td>No further than her eyes can see</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Another thing about this gal, fine and fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>But she just hates to have her man get out of her sight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Look for you and can’t find you, she begin to have the blues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>“Talk on the Corner” (1969)</td>
<td>Looking for him in the evening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>“Talk on the Corner” (as “She’s</td>
<td>A bit further than her eyes can see</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Lyrics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funny That Way,” 1970)</td>
<td>Look for you and can’t find you (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 30.8 “Talk on the Corner” (as “She’s Just Funny That Way,” 1970)    | A bit further than her eyes can see  
Look for you in the evening, can’t find you  
When she get her eyes fastened on you (3)                                                                                               |
| 30.9 “Talk on the Corner” (1971)                                   | Look for you and can’t find you (1)                                                                                                                                                                    |
| 31. Talking Blues in E (ca. 1969)                                  | Has anybody seen this gal? (1)                                                                                                                                                                        |
| 32. “Tesse” (1962)                                                 | Tesse was a maiden with a sparkling eye  
Tesse had give a note to me  
But Tesse always turn her head away  
Why don’t you turn around (4)                                                                                                               |
| 33.1 “Whistlin’ Blues” (1962/65)                                   | I looked up at the sun  
I happened to look back  
I don’t know what caused me to look back  
I looked back and saw a tall girl come along  
She had hair like Mary and I believe she walked just like the Lord  
I kept on looking at her  
A man will look at a good-looking woman  
She was looking at me, and I was looking at her (4)                                                                                          |
| 33.2 “Whistlin’ Blues” (1971)                                      | Something told me to look up at the sun and see how high the sun was  
Saw the sun bending low  
I looked up the street, and I saw a woman  
She all looking so good  
She had hair like Mary and walked just like the Lord  
She still kept her eyes on me (7)                                                                                                             |
| 33.3 “Whistlin’ Blues” (1971)                                      | I looked up at the sun  
I was looking for anyone in the streets that I know  
I looked up and saw a woman coming down the street  
She looked just like – she walked just like, like Mary – she had hair like Mary and walked just like the Lord  
She kept her eyes at mine, I kept my eyes at hers (5)                                                                                       |
| 34. “You’re Goin’ to Quit Me, Baby” (1963)                         | None                                                                                                                                                                                                   |