

# the **BLUES** project

DAVE VAN RONK

JOHN KOERNER

GEOFF MULDAUR

Courtesy of Prestige Records

DAVE RAY

DANNY KALB

Courtesy of Prestige Records

IAN BUCHANAN

MARK SPOELSTRA

ERIC VON SCHMIDT

Courtesy of Prestige Records



A COMPENDIUM OF THE VERY BEST ON THE URBAN BLUES SCENE

EKL-264

# ELEKTRA RECORDS

51 WEST 51st STREET • NEW YORK, NEW YORK (10019)

The Musicians, in order of their appearance

## DAVE RAY:

Dave "Snaker" Ray, whose ambition is to be a doctor, started playing guitar while a sophomore in high school. He originally began with blues (Leadbelly) to keep his fingers nimble for what he thought would be a classical-flamenco guitarist career. "After an adagio by Sor and a hacked-up Farruca, I began playing Led-better's stuff exclusively," Dave reports. He began playing the 12-string guitar when a senior in high school, and lists as early influences, Elvis' Sun label recordings, Bo Diddley, Muddy Waters, early Chicago, and, of course, Leadbelly.

"I sing the blues because it's a medium not as demanding as literature or serious music, and free enough to permit a total statement of personality and self," Dave states. "I play blues because I feel it's important to me to express myself and because I feel it's a significant form of music which hasn't had enough dispersment. As far as white men playing blues, that's all who do play blues . . . the new Negroes are too busy (doing other things)."

Discography: Blues, Rags and Hollers (Elektra EKL 240). Dave Ray may soon be heard, with John Koerner and Tony Glover, on Elektra EKL 267.

## ERIC VON SCHMIDT:

Eric writes: "Born 1931; began singing in 1948; first influences were Leadbelly, Josh White and Jelly Roll Morton -- then Library of Congress material and field recordings. Worked as magazine illustrator, then painter until 1952 . . . two years in the army, and then to Florida, where I worked as a frame-maker and built a 27-foot ketch which was almost called the 'John Hurt'. Won a Fulbright grant to Italy and painted in Florence for 1½ beautiful years. Returned to States with creative and financial honeymoon over. Moved to Cambridge . . . and finally got some illustration work in Boston . . . have been illustrating (and recently writing) children's books ever since. Married, have two children, one book (Come For To Sing), two more books on the way. Have won major awards in both painting and commercial design, and proudly bear the title of Worst Guitar Player In Folk Music. Am presently art director of Pathways of Sound, a company devoted to children and those who will buy records for them.

"The cover of this album was made in equal parts of paper from Japan, glue from Borden's, and rum from Barbados. There used to be a pretty girl sitting next to the guy playing the guitar, but the Elektra art director cut her off because he wanted her all to himself.

"People should and are writing their own material and infusing their experiences and time into their songs. It's the only way to keep the tradition alive and kicking.

"Records: Rolf Cahn and Eric Von Schmidt (Folkways FA 2417), Come For To Sing (with other artists) (Pathways of Sound POS 1033), The Folk Blues of Eric Von Schmidt (Prestige Folklore 14005), and Dick Farina and Eric Von Schmidt (with Ethan Signer and Blind Boy Grunt) (Folklore). The last is an English LP."

## FRITZ RICHMOND:

Sebastian (see Ginger Man) is one of those persons whose very presence generates good times, and since he is without a peer on washtub bass, his arrival at any session is bound to be explosive. Also a master of jug and stovepipe, he is presently working with Jim Kweskin and The Jug Band.

Aside from this recording, Richmond has performed and recorded with the Charles River Valley Boys, Bill Keith and Jim Rooney, Tom Rush, Jackie Washington, Eric Von Schmidt, Geoff Muldaur, and Jim Kweskin and The Jug Band.

## JOHN B. SEBASTIAN:

Within an incredibly short period of time, John has become recognized as one of the finest mouth-harp players in the United States. Sebastian can be heard with the Even Dozen Jug Band (Elektra EKL 246) and with Fred Neil & Vince Martin (Elektra EKL 248).

## JOHN KOERNER:

"Spider" John Koerner, a lanky, long-legged character whose personality is as free-wheeling as his music, started playing guitar in 1956. After a false start in folk music, John soon began to play nothing but blues, gravitating to his goodtimey, happy-go-lucky style because "there's too many sad songs and it makes me happy to play this way." Other blues recordings have not had too much influence on him; he writes most of his material, and it is all stamped in a highly personal, joyfully expressive mold. John admits to no artistic credo, doesn't want to talk about it, and simply shrugs, "I can't go around verbalizing on (the stuff); I make my own music, that's all." And, once the 7-string Gibson guitar gets rolling, that's more than enough.

Discography: Blues, Rags and Hollers (Elektra EKL 240). John Koerner may soon be heard, with Dave Ray and Tony Glover, on Elektra EKL 267.

## GEOFF MULDAUR:

Geoff Muldaur grew up near New York City (in Pelham), but for the last three of his twenty years he has lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and thinks of that as his home country. In many ways, he has grown up with the blues; he remembers hearing Bessie Smith and Leadbelly recordings as a young boy. When he was eighteen, he made a sojourn to Wortham, Texas, with a broom to sweep off Blind Lemon Jefferson's grave, but only got as far as Lafayette, Louisiana. Recently, he has been working both as a soloist and as a member of Jim Kweskin's Jug Band.

"I'm so sick of defining 'the blues'," Geoff says. "Let (the folklorists) and those other guys do that. 'Blues' is too personal a word to tell anybody else about. What does 'green' mean? (A well known blues scholar) says I don't even sing 'de Blues' because I'm white. Okay. I don't. I sing songs I like. I'm a part of them just because I like them, like being a part of someone you love just because you love them."

Discography: Sleepy Man Blues (Prestige Folklore 14004), Jim Kweskin and the Jug Band (Vanguard VRS 9139), and as an assisting musician on Eric Von Schmidt's Prestige Folklore LP 14005.

## DAVE VAN RONK:

Born in Brooklyn in 1936, Dave Van Ronk left high school at 15, and between musical engagements, worked at such jobs as apprentice printer, eye-dot painter in a Mickey Mouse factory, and merchant seaman. At 16 he entered music professionally, playing tenor banjo and guitar in traditional jazz groups (Eric Heystad's Jazz Cardinals and the Brute Force Jazz Band were two). During this time, he was becoming more involved with the folk music and blues idioms. In 1957 he emerged as a solo folksinger, and in 1958 he made his first recordings. Three years later he married Terri Thal.

Van Ronk, who now records for Mercury, says, "If I could formulate an artistic credo, it probably couldn't have any relevance for anyone but myself. I try to avoid repeating myself. A song, like any statement, can mean many things at different times."

His discography, strong evidence of tremendous versatility, includes Foc'sle Songs and Shanties (Folkways FA 2429), The Unfortunate Rake (Folkways FS 3805), Dave Van Ronk Sings Ballads, Blues and A Spiritual (Folkways FS 3818), Van Ronk Sings (Folkways FA 2383), Dave Van Ronk: Folksinger (Prestige Folklore 14012), Dave Van Ronk: In The Tradition (Prestige Folklore 14001), Dave Van Ronk and the Ragtime Jug Stompers (Mercury MG 20864, mono.; SR 60864, stereo), and Dave Van Ronk (Mercury MG 20908, mono.; SR 60908, stereo).

## IAN BUCHANAN:

Born, raised and schooled in Manhattan, Ian Buchanan started playing blues the summer before he entered New York University. He transferred from an engineering major at NYU to Antioch College, where he graduated with a degree in Psychology. Now married and presently attending Mannes College of Music, where he is studying classical guitar, Buchanan says, "I tend to like blues that understate, as exemplified by Blind Blake or Lonnie Johnson; in contrast to such artists as Muddy Waters and Lightnin' Hopkins, who tend to play a more emotional and gutsy blues."

## DANNY KALB:

Danny writes: "Kalb was born in Brooklyn in 1942, later moved to Mount Vernon, a sleepy suburb where he grew to young manhood mostly hooked on rock-and-roll. . . in high school, he became lead guitar in a rock-and roll group unfortunately titled the Gay-Notes. He also played in several jazz and dance bands. Throughout this formative period, interest in blues grew. . . first influences were Josh White, Brownie McGhee, and Lightnin'. . . later, Muddy Waters, Snooks Eaglin, Dave Van Ronk, and Eugene Debs. Kalb spent two years at the University of Wisconsin, perfecting his 'art'. Following this, he came to New York City, whose bright lights and painted women have never ceased to astound and amuse him. He is currently working with Sam Charters, playing the blues and, in general, trying to figure things out.

"Kalb on record: Dave Van Ronk and the Ragtime Jug Stompers (Mercury MG 20864), The New Strangers (with Sam Charters) (Prestige Folklore 14027), and as accompanying guitarist for Phil Ochs on All The News That's Fit To Sing (Elektra EKL 269).

"I play the blues because it is my most natural form of expression. I love the blues because. . . they're real."

## MARK SPOELSTRA:

Mark writes: "I was born in 1940 (conceived pre-war) in Kansas city, Missouri, and moved to Arizona when I was three and to California when I was four. . . after high school, worked at Yellowstone Park, but got all shook up in an earthquake and headed back home. Soon went to San Francisco to work for the Jewish Community Center. I sang a song about Jesus, got sat on, and quit. Then, hitch-hiked to New York City, spent two years screaming in coffeehouses, ate poorly, drank well, met a good-looking girl, went to Puerto Rico with her, married her, got sick and was flat on my back for six months, unmarried her, and made two LPs for Folkways Records (The Songs of Mark Spoelstra, FA 2444, and Mark Spoelstra Recorded at the Club 47, Inc., FG 3572).

"Then moved to Boston, became joyously happy, and got a letter from the selective service system. Found an acceptable civilian job in lieu of entering the armed forces, and, on my way to Fresno, California, recorded the songs on this album, and signed a beautiful contract with Elektra Records.

"The blues are like looking through a high-powered telescope. You see everything so much better. Sometimes I can sing the real blues only when I'm alone or with a few friends -- because I'm afraid a whole audience won't want to look through the telescope with me. . . The blues are better than a doctor, except sometimes they cost more."

## DOUG POMEROY:

Doug is a friend of Mark Spoelstra's who arrived at the session and played washboard and kazoo, and that is all we know about him.

## TONY GLOVER:

Tony "Little Sun" Glover is a harmonica player, aspiring poet and novelist, contributor to the Little Sandy Review, and is currently hard at work on a book on Kenneth Patchen. He can also be heard on Blues, Rags and Hollers, (Elektra EKL 240).

## BOB LANDY:

To musicians, his piano playing is almost legend. On Downtown Blues, we have a rare recording of him playing treble piano with Eric Von Schmidt.

notes by PAUL NELSON

### TWENTY-FIVE RECOMMENDED TRADITIONAL BLUES DISCS

- Scrapper Blackwell: Mr. Scrapper's Blues (Prestige Bluesville 1047)
- Leroy Carr: Blues Before Sunrise (Columbia CL 1799)
- Blind Gary Davis: Harlem Street Singer (Prestige Bluesville 1015)
- Sleepy John Estes: Sleepy John Estes, 1929-1940 (RBF 8)
- Mississippi John Hurt: Folk Songs And Blues (Piedmont 13157)
- Robert Johnson: King of the Delta Blues Singers (Columbia CL 1654)
- Leadbelly: Leadbelly Memorial, Volume Four (Stinson SLP 51)
- Muddy Waters: The Best Of Muddy Waters (Chess 1427)
- Bukka White: Mississippi Blues, Volume One (Tacoma B1001)
- Big Joe Williams: Piney Wood Blues (Delmark DL 602)
- Jimmy Yancey: The Yancey Special (Atlantic 130)
- Afro-American Blues and Game Songs (Library of Congress AAFS L4) Anthology.
- Afrd-American Spirituals, Work Songs and Ballads (Library of Congress AAFS L3) Anthology.
- Angola Prisoners' Blues (Folk-Lyric LFS A-3) Anthology.
- Anthology of American Folk Music, Volumes One, Two and Three (Folkways FA 2951, 2952, 2953)  
Anthology. Includes other types of music as well as blues.
- The Country Blues (RBF 1) Anthology.
- The Great Jug Bands: Jugs 1927-1933! (Origin Jazz Library OJL 4) Anthology.
- I Have To Paint My Face (Arhoolie F 1005) Anthology.
- The Jug Bands (RBF 6) Anthology.
- Kings of the 12-String Guitar (Piedmont 13159) Anthology.
- The Mississippi Blues, 1927-1940 (Origin Jazz Library OJL 5) Anthology.
- Negro Blues And Hollers (Library of Congress AFS L59) Anthology.
- Negro Prison Songs (Tradition TLP 1020) Field Recordings.
- Really! The Country Blues 1927-1933 (Origin Jazz Library OJL 2) Anthology.
- The Rural Blues (RBF 202) Anthology.

## SIDE ONE

**FIXIN' TO DIE** (Dave Ray) is Dave Ray's 12-string guitar bottleneck version of the Bukka White classic. Dave learned it from the RBF album, The Country Blues (RF 1). Full of almost overwhelming nuance, there is a powerful guitar-voice interplay; the 12-string sets up driving, incessant bass figures, sharply punctuated by the sliding bottleneck on the treble strings, while the vocal is brilliantly in genre. No exhibitionism is necessary, only complete mastery of all resources. Very few blues guitarists ever master the difficult 6-string bottleneck style; Dave is the first and only one I've heard do it on the 12-string. Vocally, this interpretation sets new standards for urban blues singers.

**BLOW, WHISTLE, BLOW** (Eric Von Schmidt) is Eric Von Schmidt's evocative reworking of Margaret Johnson's When A Gator Holler, Folks Say It's A Sign Of Rain (from Folkways' FJ 2801, The History of Jazz, Volume One). John Sebastian's harmonica is substituted for King Oliver's cornet, and Fritz Richmond is heard on washtub bass. Von Schmidt projects a nice, lazy, "riverboat" quality into the song, while Sebastian's harp adds just the right touch of longing.

**MY LITTLE WOMAN** (John Koerner), an original song by John Koerner, is based primarily on one incredibly catchy guitar figure; its very simplicity is infectious, and there is an unusually tight integration of vocal and guitar lines. John's short, repeated patterns spread pure joy, and his style proves remarkably versatile, both vocally and instrumentally. The guitar here is a 7-string Gibson, with G string doubled at the octave.

**GINGER MAN** (Geoff Muldaur), a lovely original blues by Geoff Muldaur, is a lyric "tribute" to Boston's Fritz Richmond. Richmond's nickname is Sebastian Dangerfield (Geoff sings: "He's the biggest danger in the field."), and the song plays easily and gently with both Fritz and the original Dangerfield from J. P. Donleavy's great novel, The Ginger Man. Muldaur's guitar playing is especially masterful here, and his singing (surely his ace in the hole) is as fine as Donleavy's writing.

**BAD DREAM BLUES** (Dave Van Ronk), an original blues, is easily the best Van Ronk on record and one of the great performances on this or any other album of urban blues singers. The guitar playing is the most complex and emotional I've yet heard Van Ronk play, and the vocal line intertwines with it brilliantly. Sometimes the voice will stop and the insistent guitar will finish the phrase; other times, the guitar will anticipate and prod the voice, filling in the phrase before the voice gets there. The combination of ever-flowing guitar (how like Mississippi John Hurt) and rough vocal timbre creates an achingly beautiful lyricism that is truly memorable; the tight artistic inter-repetition of instrument and voice, each commenting on each other, is remarkable.

**WINDING BOY** (Ian Buchanan), an extremely erotic delta blues, shows off Ian Buchanan's agile guitar playing to good advantage. Again, as in so many good blues, the vocal states it and the guitar retells it. This vocal-instrumental montage is part of all fine blues. Fritz Richmond's strong washtub bass supports Buchanan here.

**I'M TROUBLED** (Danny Kalb) finds Danny Kalb's guitar prancing through this happy, racing mainstream blues (from The Best Of Muddy Waters, a Chess LP) with great, relaxed swing, while John Sebastian and Fritz Richmond -- harmonica and washtub bass, respectively -- aid and abet the good-timey sound with some spirited backing.

**FRANCE BLUES** (Mark Spoelstra) marries blues and jazz in the jug band tradition. Although not a member of any of the urban jug bands (the Even Dozen Jug Band, Jim Kweskin and the Jug Band, the True Endeavor Jug Band, Dave Van Ronk and the Ragtime Jug Stompers), Spoelstra, nonetheless, was active in bringing about the renewed interest in jug band music. There is a nice 12-string guitar break here, delicate and cat-like, and Mark nimbly manages to stay one step ahead of Fritz Richmond (on washtub bass) and Doug Pomeroy (washboard and kazoo), who are in hot pursuit.

## SIDE TWO

**DON'T YOU LEAVE ME HERE** (Dave Van Ronk), from the singing of Henry Thomas, finds Van Ronk in a tongue-in-cheek scat mood, carefully building a humorous tempest in a teapot with funny mumbblings and shadings. The vocal growling and the solid rock of the guitar make it all good, rowdy fun. Fritz Richmond joins in on washtub bass.

**DEVIL GOT MY WOMAN** (Geoff Muldaur), despite some beautiful guitar playing by Geoff and the sensitive mandolin accompaniment of Eric Von Schmidt, is all vocal -- and an extremely daring vocal at that. Muldaur is not afraid to take chances, and his projected aged blues voice is full of fine nuance and delicate shading. A tremendously introspective performance learned from a recording by Skip James.

**SOUTH BOUND TRAIN** (John Koerner) unites John Koerner's strong, solid guitar playing with Tony Glover's harmonica in a blues "train piece". John's 7-string conjures up the bold, black swatches of the train wheels, while Tony's harp showers soft, colorful sparks of train rhythm; together, they blend for a complete train sound. The stinging bass notes of the guitar against the lighter buzz of the harmonica, creates a continual, subtle back-and-forth, back-and-forth, back-and-forth sound.

**DOWNTOWN BLUES** (Geoff Muldaur) carries the blues to its logical modern outer limits. In literature, we have Genet, Beckett, and Sartre; in blues, we have the Big Blues Band of Geoff Muldaur, this time making the leap to faith with a little existential fluff they learned from a record by Frank Stokes and Dan Sane. Muldaur sings and handles the philosophic guitar; Fritz Richmond, the washtub bass; John Sebastian, harmonica; and Eric Von Schmidt and Bob Landy out-Camus each other on twin pianos.

**LEAVIN' HERE BLUES** (Dave Ray) is both a conglomeration of warm-up tunes (there are certainly traces of Broke Down Engine) and an improvisation based loosely on Bukka White's Panama Limited (now available on Origin Jazz Library's The Mississippi Blues, 1927-1940, OJL 5). The guitar comments under and between the lines, seemingly thrown off with comparative ease, are truly fabulous. And somehow Dave always suggests lots of untapped reserve, ready when needed.

**HELLO BABY BLUES** (Danny Kalb) is a perfect, tight, eloquent instrumental blues statement -- and a guitar solo improvised entirely in the studio. Danny Kalb makes use of the whole palette here, from darkest power to most brilliant and infinitesimal subtlety.

**SHE'S GONE** (Mark Spoelstra) features the solid country sound of Mark Spoelstra's 12-string guitar, swinging lightly and booming out ragtime runs behind the washboard of Doug Pomeroy and the washtub bass of Fritz Richmond. Mark learned the song from an "X" label LP, King Of The Blues, where it is sung by Jim Jackson.

**SLAPPIN' ON MY BLACK CAT BONE** (Dave Ray) is wildly erotic and strongly reminiscent of Snaker's Here (see Blues, Rags and Hollers, on Elektra EKL 240). There is some very intricate and playful fooling around on the 12-string; the vocal is calm, but the guitar is wild underneath -- all sorts of brilliant staccato runs, flashes, glints. The drowsy, deliberate, almost disinterested vocal serves as a perfect straight man for the instrumental fireworks. Says Dave, "A black cat bone is a conqueror of sorts, a necessary item for conjuring. Not obtained by the Huck Finn hurling-over-the-graveyard-fence method, but rather, by the careful incision just below the root line of some black cat. Usually carried in a small leathern (or vinyl nowadays) bag suspended from a thong around the neck."