

A conversation with Dave Van Ronk

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Few folk or blues enthusiasts of my generation need to be introduced to Dave Van Ronk, the extraordinary singer and guitarist. His name is inextricably linked, first and foremost, to the folk music scene in New York City's Greenwich Village in the 1960s. He played with and knew virtually everyone of musical significance in that decade.

Van Ronk, born in Brooklyn on June 30, 1936, has been performing for more than four decades. He made his first record for Moses Asch's Folkways label in 1959 and gained widespread recognition for his recordings with Prestige in the 1960s. He performed at countless festivals, such as the annual Newport event, and toured the US and internationally. A compilation of those early recordings, *The Folkways Years, 1959-1961*, is available from Smithsonian/Folkways. His most recent recording, *From ... Another Time and Place* (1995) was released on Alcazar Records.

Van Ronk continues to perform, as well as teach guitar. I saw him at a club in Ann Arbor in late 1997. He plays the sort of music he likes, with small regard for the boundaries that normally separate jazz and blues and country and folk. He proves in practice that those distinctions don't mean very much. His performances now are stripped down to the essentials: emotional and musical honesty. He is a unique individual and musical figure.

Van Ronk, a lifelong sympathizer of the socialist movement, was a member of the Workers League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, in the late 1960s. I spoke to him recently in Greenwich Village, where he still lives.

(Dave Van Ronk's discography is available [here](#))

DW: What were the social circumstances under which you grew up?

DVR: If you asked anybody in my family, they would have very stridently proclaimed themselves middle class. My mother and father were separated, so he doesn't count. My mother was a stenographer, a stenographer-typist. My uncle and my grandfather both worked in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. He was an electrician and subsequently became something of an aristocrat of labor. My great grandfather admired Eugene V. Debs. My great grandmother hated Debs because she said he was leading my great grandfather off the straight and narrow, and getting him drunk. She was probably right. In any event, the family, mostly Irish, was working class. I was born in Bushwick, but I grew up in Richmond Hill, in Queens. I went to Catholic school.

DW: What was that like?

DVR: Horrible. The nuns were ignorant, if not mean. There was Sister Attila Maria, for example. These were vicious Irish nuns. Oh, I got along with some of them.

DW: What did you read as a kid?

DVR: It depends what age. I remember reading Grant's memoirs, the autobiography of Buffalo Bill. Lots of Mark Twain. A massive book called *Land and Sea*, some sort of anthropological study. I read Hemingway at 13, *The Sun Also Rises*, which bored me. My brain was like the attic of the Smithsonian. They left me pretty much on my own. I began hanging out in pool halls.

When I was 15 or so, a truant officer picked me up in a pool hall. Actually, he was there for the guy I was playing with. I was hauled before the principal. You never saw the principal, this was like being brought

before Stalin. He called me "a filthy ineducable little beast." That's a direct quote. You don't forget something like that. They basically said that if I didn't show up for school they'd mark me present, they wouldn't send the truant officer after me. At 16 I enrolled in something called continuing education. Once a month I'd go out to Jamaica, but I didn't take it seriously.

By this time I was listening to music, to jazz. Bebop, modern jazz mostly. But I leaned to the traditional jazz. That had its pluses and minuses. I cut myself off from the mainstream of jazz. It stood me in good stead later on, as a musician.

I started sitting in, playing the guitar, at clubs, like the Stuyvesant Casino, Childs' Paramount. Coleman Hawkins would come in, Johnny Hodges. There is an apprenticeship system in jazz. You teach the young ones. So even if the musicians weren't personally that likable, they felt an obligation to help the younger musicians. I played on the bandstand. I wasn't a member of the AF of M [musicians' union], of course. There would be somebody, like Jimmy Rushing, who would start singing if the union delegate came in, and you'd take off. Of course, your instrument was still up there. The delegate knew, but he wouldn't do anything about it.

DW: How did your recording career begin?

DVR: I was playing at a club. Odetta was performing there and she heard me. She said I was good. "Do you do this full-time?" "No, I'm a seaman." And I liked shipping out. "Well, you should," she said. "Why don't you make a demo tape? I'll send it to Albert Grossman." He owned a club in Chicago, and later managed Bob Dylan. Well, it wasn't so easy to make a demo tape in those days. But somehow I managed it. And I sent it to her. I hunkered down to wait. And I waited. Nothing happened. Finally, I hitchhiked to Chicago, in 24 hours, staying awake with Benzedrine. I was in bad shape when I got there. I got to Grossman's club, and, as luck would have it, he was there. He had never received any tape. But since I was there, he said, "Why don't you do an audition?" So I did. And when I was finished, I said, "Well?" He said, "I book Big Bill Broonzy in here, and Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee. Why should I hire you?" And I blew up, I shouted, "You SOB, Grossman, you're Crowjimming me [practicing reverse racism]." And I went back to New York. But on the way, I got pickpocketed. I was sleeping, and one of my rides picked my pocket and stole my seaman's papers. That's why I'm a folk singer.

DW: Tell me a little bit more about the "golden era," as you described it. How did you experience the boom in the early sixties?

DVR: It was pretty weird. All of a sudden there was money all over the place. If there was ever any truth to the trickle-down theory, the only evidence of it I've ever seen was in that period of 1960 to 1965. All of sudden they were handing out major label recording contracts like they were coming in Cracker Jack boxes. People who had been sleeping on floors and eating in cafeterias a year or two before, all of a sudden had enough money to buy a suit, if they wanted to. And musically it was very interesting. It attracted a large number of talented people, who probably wouldn't have been interested in folk music had it not been so popular. Someone like Jose Feliciano. He played the guitar, he sang, ergo, he was a

folk singer. Folk City, Gaslight, the Newport Folk Festival. There was a tremendous attraction for that brief period. Bob Dylan was another.

DW: When did you first meet him?

DVR: The winter of 1961-62, when he first came to New York.

DW: What was he like at that time?

DVR: Nervous. Nervous energy, he couldn't sit still. And very, very evasive. You never could pin him down on anything; he had a lot of stories about who he was and where he came from. He never seemed to be able to get them straight. What impressed me the most about him was his genuine love for Woody Guthrie. In retrospect, even he says now that he came to New York to "make it." That's BS. When he came to New York there was no folk music, no career possible, it was out of the question, it simply wasn't going to happen. What he said at the time is the story I believe. He came because he had to meet Woody Guthrie. And he used to go out to the hospital where Woody, who had Huntington's Chorea, stayed. He was slowly but surely sinking. And Bobby used to go out there two or three times a week and sit there, and play songs for him. In that regard he was as stand-up a cat as anyone I've ever met. That's also what got him into writing songs. He wrote songs for Woody, to amuse him, to entertain him. He also wanted Woody's approval.

DW: Could he communicate that approval?

DVR: His communication by the time Bobby showed up was at a minimum. But he could make himself understood if you were very patient. I believe Bobby did establish enough of a rapport to be able to do that.

DW: Did you like his music?

DVR: Yes, very much. It had what I call a gung-ho, unrelenting quality, a take-no-prisoners approach that was really very effective. He acquired very, very devoted fans among the other musicians before he had written his first song.

DW: Who were some of the other people who impressed you at the time?

DVR: There were a lot of them. Janis Ian. She was such a good musician. For one thing, the level of musicianship in the folk community was pretty low. So you could be Johann Sebastian Bach and it wouldn't be noticed. Curiously enough, it had its up side too. Nobody got zapped for being too sophisticated. Janis had a sophisticated melodic, chord sense. I knew her when she made *Society's Child*, before it became a hit. It just so happened that we were recording for the same label. She was 17 at the time.

Ian and Sylvia, who, when you got right down to it, were essentially country and western singers. I just recorded his *Four Strong Winds*. It's a wonderful song. It was the first thing he ever wrote. If my first song had been like that, I probably would have been afraid to write a second one. I used to be a pin setter when I was a kid, in a bowling alley, before they had the machines. On slow nights I used to bowl. I was terrible, the worst. But one night, I don't know what got into me, I bowled a turkey, three consecutive strikes. I have not picked up a bowling ball since.

DW: You mentioned in passing the civil rights movement. Did you ever go to the South?

DVR: No, I didn't. I worked with Jim Farmer and CORE here. I did this, that and the other thing. Mostly I did benefits, which is essentially what I do best. But when they needed a warm body, I presented them with mine for whatever it was worth.

DW: When you speak about the money, or the recording contracts, that became available, did you ever feel there was a moment when you had to make certain choices?

DVR: If you generate \$100,000, is there anything wrong with asking for \$35,000?

DW: I shouldn't have put it that way. Did you ever feel that you could put yourself in a situation where you would change?

DVR: No. The thought never entered my head. And for good reason. I've been very, very prosperous and I've been very, very poor, all in the

last 20 or 30 years, and I don't see that my *weltanschauung* has been very much influenced. I'm a very, very stubborn man. You can't be afraid of failure and you can't be afraid of success, because either one gets in the way of your work. I formed a rock and roll band in 1965. Frankly, I was making a grab for the brass ring. I couldn't see any reason why not. Subsequently, I saw reasons why not. I found it musically boring and I quit, even though it was my band. Maybe we didn't give it enough of a chance, or something along that line. Maybe we needed better representation, or this, that and the other thing. But that isn't why I left. I left because I got tired of doing the same goddamn songs every night.

DW: What were some of the best experiences, the most satisfying experiences performing?

DVR: Some of them were in very small places. The first time I ever worked the Club 47 in Cambridge, Mass. No, I didn't actually work there the particular time I'm thinking of. I was up there just visiting Jim Kweskin, of the jug band. The next thing I know I'm bombed out of my mind on the stage at the Club 47 where I could never get arrested before. And I'm up there, I don't know what I'm doing, I'm just watching my fingers. Wow, they move and everything. I get off the stage and the manager comes over, "I didn't know how good you were, you want a job?" I found the missing ingredient to get hired at the Club 47 apparently. It's the incongruous things that stick in your head, not the great, wonderful ... the standing ovation you got in Nova Scotia in 1972, the great review you got in the *Times*. It's the quirky things that I remember, like down in Philadelphia I had to do some kind of early morning TV show. For some reason it was called Aqua something or other.

DW: It wasn't done under water.

DVR: It would have been better. So they sent a car for me to take me to the show, it's an aquarium. And it's one of these teenage dance shows. They have these huge fish tanks all around. They didn't have the facilities to do live broadcasting. So you had to lip synch. I had never done that before. Furthermore, even if I had done it before, it wouldn't have helped. I don't phrase my songs the same way twice; I try not to anyway. All I remember really is kids dancing, and as they go by the camera flipping the camera the finger. I remember saying, "Actually, I only came here to see the piranha, but you'll do." Those are the things.

DW: Did they dance to your music?

DVR: Yeah. They would have danced to an amplified cricket. They were there to boogie.

DW: This is in the 60s.

DVR: Yeah, it was one of those Dick Clark-type shows. At the time, I was outraged. I tried not to let it show. The first time I told the story and everybody started to laugh, I realized it was a wonderful thing. Only in America.

DW: What about the Newport Folk Festival, what was that like?

DVR: I never liked those things. I never liked the musical aspect of it. There was no focus, for one thing, too many things were going on at once. It was a three-ring circus. During the afternoon there'd be three or four concerts going on, and the sound overlapping. You couldn't even really hear what you came to hear. Put yourself in my position, or any singer's position, how would you like to sing for 15,000 people with frisbees? No focus. It was better at night, on the main stage at night, because there is a bit more focus, there was only one thing going on. The audience does tend to concentrate on what's happening on stage. So that was a little bit better. There were performers who thrived on that kind of thing. I never did. Pete Seeger, with every thousand people they added, he'd get better.

DW: What do you think of him and his music?

DVR: Oh, he's a wonderful musician. He's another guy who has been shortchanged as a musician. He's a very good musician and a very good singer. He phrases well. What am I supposed to say about the guy who invented my profession? And he did. He and Burl Ives, I suppose. I don't

do the kind of music Pete does, but if you listen to that first solo album, that's a musical milestone. That stands to this day.

DW: What did you think of Joni Mitchell?

DVR: I thought she was about the best songwriter of the 60s. A remarkable sensibility, a good lyricist. Sometimes she lets the tricks get out of hand. She plays too obviously with things like alliteration and internal rhyming. It's that kind of playfulness, even in her serious songs, that give her material its *je ne sais quoi*. She is a very playful lyricist. I like that. John Donne was a very playful lyricist.

DW: After 1965 or so, did things decline?

DVR: Well, you know they kept on going in the form of folk-rock, but as far as the folk revival was concerned, it was pretty much over. I played in the same places. The business kept prospering right until 1969 or 1970. Until the whole hippie thing became manifestly the nightmare that it had always been. And then business got very bad. In the early 1970s. 1971, '72. The rooms were closing down, record labels weren't signing acoustic acts any more. Although they had been pretty much been getting out of that for some time before that. The shock of Richard Nixon. That guy was pretty demoralizing. The whole *raison d'être* of the New Left had been exposed as a lot of hot air, that was demoralizing. I mean, these kids thought they were going to change the world, they really did. They were profoundly deluded. I used to talk to them, to the hippies, yuppies. I understood their mentality as well as anyone could. But things like Altamont, things like Kent State, the election of Richard Nixon, the fact that the war just kept going on and on and on, and nothing they did could stop it. Phil Ochs wrote the song, *I declare the war is over*, that was despair, sheer despair. By the mid-70s, I wanted to get out of the business. I was tired anyway.

DW: Had you continued recording?

DVR: Oh, yeah. I don't think I went a year or so without a record between 1959 and 1979, sometimes two. I got in under the wire, so I could keep on trundling along, although on a much lower level in terms of income. But by 1976 I hung it up for a while. To hell with this. I hung out my shingle. I taught guitar for a year or so. Performing is addictive. After a year or so, I was so antsy, in spite of the fact that I hadn't changed my mind about the pluses or minuses of doing it.

DW: What is it you enjoy most about performing?

DVR: Well, you know, it's very hard to put it into words. If I could put it into words, I'd be a writer. If I do a piece in my living room, if I practice it—and I have the tapes to prove this—it's not going to be as good as doing the same piece in front of an audience. When you're working in front of an audience, you have incentive to excel. When you're working for yourself, you don't have that incentive. Part of it is fear, which supplies a good deal of adrenaline. Part of it is sheer hamminess. I'm an exhibitionist, I was an exhibitionist as a kid.

One of my earliest memories ... I knew three full verses of the *Star Spangled Banner* when I was seven or eight years old. And one of the nuns discovered this phenomenon and I was actually sent around from classroom to classroom to do the whole thing. Let me tell you, I was not the most popular kid in school after that happened. Like the kid who memorized the most scripture in *Tom Sawyer*. I was a ham. Now, you know, I'm not so much. You get it out of your system. Whatever it is you have to prove, you prove.

I was talking to a friend of mine, a psychoanalyst. For some reason, we were talking about Jack the Ripper. His theory was that the reason why Jack the Ripper disappeared, was never caught, was because he cured himself. He'd gone through it, and after a few murders, he was no longer crazy. The performer is much like Jack the Ripper. After a while you get it out of your system and you're not nearly the exhibitionist that you were when you started out. By that time you've acquired the skills. I still enjoy it.

DW: Do you think that art or music is a way of knowing the world, of

experiencing the world?

DVR: I don't think you're dealing with the same thing in the arts that you're dealing with in life. Except insofar as it is a way of organizing things. It is no more like life than chess is like life. And yet some of the skills that you acquire, a way of thinking, a way of addressing problems, will carry over into the way you organize your life, the way you look at the world. Most of it's done on a subconscious level. If you look at music, you see theme, variation, you see symmetry, asymmetry, you see structure, and these are related to skills in the real world. I think I have more in common with a carpenter than you might think. We're putting things together. That aspect of it does relate to the real world in a parallel way. In the sense that two parallel lines never meet, but they are nonetheless parallel. Which is why some of the greatest musicians are the greatest screw-ups.

DW: What sort of music still interests you the most?

DVR: Jazz. Most of what I listen to now is mainstream jazz from 1935 right up to and including early bebop and cool jazz. I get off at hard bop. Didn't like it at the time, still don't like it. Modern jazz per se is fine. I'm not put off by the weird changes, they're not weird, not to me. Modern Jazz Quartet, Gillespie, Parker, a lot of Teddy Wilson. A lot of the vocalists, Billie Holiday and some others who got lost in the shuffle.

DW: Do you think that it is inevitable that there is such a wall between so-called popular music and so-called classical music?

DVR: That's a very, very complicated question. What you're asking is a historical question, a question of the sociology of music. In this country that is an incredibly complex thing. We are a nation of immigrants. People came here with a body of music that was not viable. They were in the market, so to speak, for music that was viable. Very early on, consumer capitalism came to their rescue, with the very thing. That started to happen right after the Civil War and became the mainstream of American music before the turn of the century. So that classical, serious orchestral music, whatever you want to call it, never really had a shot.

Also, you have to bear in mind that classical music has been music of the ruling class since its inception. Monteverdi wasn't writing for the people. If he had, he would have starved to death. It's an elite musical form, which casts no inherent aspersions on it. This is a socio-musicological fact. Its history militates against it here. This is a very egalitarian country, and the very idea of there being such a thing as an elite with its own music is anathema to most Americans. How would one go about bridging that? Certain feckless attempts were made in the 1930s and 40s by CBS, NBC and so on. I remember listening to opera live on the radio from the Met [Metropolitan Opera]. I think it was on Saturday afternoons, with Milton Cross. I liked it, but I was a weird kid and I liked weird stuff. But early on I heard Oscar Levant's definition of opera, which you may or may not have heard: It's a play where everybody gets stabbed, but instead of bleeding, they sing. I think most Americans, if you wrote that out, they'd sign it. Would it be possible, if somehow or other, consumer capitalism...?

DW: Let's say, in a better society.

DVR: It's really hard to say. One of the problems would be the problem of continuity. A revolutionary period is not a good period for the arts. Now what we've got going right now is hardly a good period for the arts. You tack a revolutionary period on to what we've got now, and you're going to see a cultural breakdown of the very first order, I suspect, and whatever emerges is going to have to emerge ... you're going to have to quite literally bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old. What grows from there, it's very hard to say, with that continuity shattered something new might arise, totally different from anything you could imagine. When you look at the mathematical possibilities of music, you realize that the way the West has taken it is far from the only way to go. I've always like Trotsky's writings as an art critic, possibly the only Trotskyist who really did understand the essentials of the field.

DW: The attempt is to initiate a discussion on social and artistic perspectives... you can't, you don't want to, tell people what to do. You can, I think, direct people's attention toward what you think is more interesting material. In any case, how does consciousness affect an artist? Does it help to have a correct political perspective? It does in general, but it doesn't necessarily make you a better painter. I would like to think that ultimately it would influence your work in some way or other.

DVR: I'm not sure it does. In my field the only way that politics can influence you is if you start singing political songs.

DW: Even directing people toward honesty or authenticity.

DVR: What you need is a whole, well-rounded historical approach to art.

DW: I agree.

DVR: You have to start with the Babylonians, the Egyptians, and right on through to the Romantics and the modernists. It's as much a life's work as politics.

DW: Absolutely.

DVR: The problem arises of priorities. With the system going haywire, running amok like it's doing now, can a political organization spare the personnel, the time, the energy? It's not a decision for me to make, thank god.

DW: We think so. We view the cultural questions as profoundly bound up with the social questions. The Russian Revolution wasn't simply the product of a political program, but of a culture that was built up over three-quarters of a century. Stalinism severely damaged that culture and we live, frankly, still in the shadow of the damage that was done. These sorts of issues are going to be absolutely indispensable in the rebuilding of a socialist culture, in the broadest sense.

DVR: I think the function of a critic, any critic, is partially that, of a preserver. That is to say, whatever emerges, it would be nice if the cultural heritage that we have managed to accumulate be handed on more or less intact. I think most modernists and even some of the post-modernists agree that the continuity in the arts is a very critical question. That's not just for a revolutionary party, but any honest critic. When you see something new, to be able to relate it to what's gone before. As well as to be able to see it within the context of the social forces at work.

If more artists were aware of the pressures that were on them, or influencing them, some of them would probably change what they were doing, and some of them would do what they are doing, but better. It's not enough that the dialectic recognizes the artist, even if the artist doesn't recognize the dialectic. It's true, but it's not enough.

DW: A great deal of what has passed for Marxism in the field of art in the last half-century has been a perversion. We have to reestablish the importance of aesthetic value. Art is not a means, it is an end, an essential ingredient of humanity. The Trotskyists were working under extremely difficult circumstances, there was the enormous isolation of the Marxist tendency in the 1940s, 1950s.... Whether they could have done better, it's not for me to judge. I think they paid a price. I think the Healy organization paid a price for its refusal, or inability to deal with all sorts of cultural and intellectual problems. I would like to think we are now emerging into a situation where we can put some of those questions back into the center of attention. That's what we are going to attempt to do.

DVR: I propose to watch your efforts.

DW: To get back to the chronology, how did you experience the 1980s?

DVR: Since the late 1970s I've been fighting a successful holding action. Two steps forward, two steps back. The thing you have to remember is that no one in their right mind ever got into this business because they thought they were going to get rich. My initial plan was to make a living. And, as far as I'm concerned, I've done it. "So far, so good," as the Irishman who fell off the Empire State Building, passing the thirtieth floor, was heard to say. What I measure my progress by isn't my standard of living. I've made a great deal of money when my output was really stagnant, and I have been really hard pressed when I'm going

through a good period. Over all, I've grown a great deal, as a musician, as a singer. I'm so much more in command of my faculties at this stage of the game than I ever was before. That to me is an important thing.

DW: That was my feeling when I saw the performance in Ann Arbor. You reach a point where the secondary issues fall away and you speak very directly and very personally, and very honestly to people.

DVR: It's possible. That can be done. You don't have to create a phony persona. You need a persona, you cannot be exactly the same person on stage as you are off. But you have to construct your persona honestly. It's got to be made out of stuff that's really there. And sorting that business out takes a long, long time. It requires a certain amount of introspection. It requires a great deal of trial and error, and it requires, again, persistence.

What excites me is doing things musically that I would never have dreamt I could do even 10 years ago. Writing, working on new arrangements, this, that and the other thing. That's what keeps me going. Working on something that interests me, it's that puzzle aspect, making those damn things fit, putting it together so it's some kind of a coherent whole. That's a lot of fun. I'm very lucky, I happened to fall into a field where I can actually make a living doing what I like. There aren't too many people who do that. It's sheer luck. Absolutely. If I could have fallen by the wayside, I would have, any number of times. What if I had gotten rich in 1964? I don't know, probably, knowing myself I would have figured some way to get myself unrich quick. But what if I had? What if I were surrounded by a bunch of yes-men, who only told me what I wanted to hear, whether I asked them to do that or not, that's how it works. Or if the bottom had dropped out completely? What would have happened then?

DW: Is there any contemporary popular music that you like?

DVR: No, no field, there are individual performers. Singer/songwriters that I admire very much. But I wouldn't say that I like singer/songwriter music by and large. As somebody once said, 95 percent of everything is crap.

DW: As you know, Jean Brust died recently. How do you remember her, and Bill?

DVR: We met in the party. Bill and Jean used to come into New York, for conferences, this, that and the other thing. We found ourselves very *sympatico*. I used to see them a lot. There was something about them, not just politically, but personally, that, you know, clicked. I miss both of them a lot.

DW: Do you have any disappointments?

DVR: I really wish my ability to focus had been better. I don't think I've accomplished a tenth of what I could have. That irritates me. I get very annoyed with myself about that. When I see the kind of work I'm capable of doing under pressure. For example, I had to do two songs that I had never tried before on four days' notice, a couple of weeks ago. One of them was by Kurt Weill, the other I chose myself. It was Earl Robinson's *I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night*.

Inside of three days I'd done it. I didn't have to chart the Weill song. It was *Johnny's Song* from *Johnny Johnson*. I thought they'd give me *Lost in the Stars*, *September Song*, the *Bilbao Song*, but, no, they gave me that dumb thing. It was hard, I was working from Weill's orchestral score. The Joe Hill song I'd never sung before. I had no idea what to do on the guitar. I did it as an encore the other night, in Oxford, New York. Thirty miles north of Binghamton. A full house of cows. Not a dry udder in the house.

I can do that kind of thing. And in theory I could have been doing that kind of thing for the last 30 years. I just don't have that single-mindedness, that focus. I could have done a lot more. But aside from that, no. I'm sorry I didn't do more and better of same.



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