

# Letters on Dave Van Ronk

16 February 2002

*Below are letters about the February 14 obituary "Dave Van Ronk, folk and blues artist, dead at 65"*

This is a beautiful obituary. It both held the content of his lifetime of work and a feeling of true love and sadness at his passing. Thank you for sharing your memory of him with us, your readers.

LCZ

Brooklyn, New York

14 February 2002

I had the pleasure of seeing Dave but once in his life, at the Tin Angel in Philly. By that time he was a bloated man, but without the bloated, cracked voice of a fading performer. The kicker for me was hearing "Good Night Irene," in that rollicking baritone that could swoop up octaves in "forte" and then end on the sweetest whisper.

And for those of you who missed him live, the music that comes through on recordings blows away many live performers, except ODETTA, who's still belting them out.

LONG LIVE DAVE!

DM

14 February 2002

A nice appreciation. I hadn't known about his party affiliation. Another dimension to a multi-dimensional man.

Our town was fortunate to hear a performance by Dave Van Ronk, not long before he fell ill. Below, for your interest, an account I sent to friends at the time.

Best,

DBJ

Princeton, New Jersey

15 February 2002

A GRAND OLD MAN

Last night the little church down the road played host to Dave Van Ronk. I recalled him from high school days, singing "Cocaine" in a gravelly voice. If the voice was gravel then, what rubble might it be now, with the passage of several decades? But who are we to

spurn such substance, to which our own flesh will in time return. I hastened down.

Apprehension was needless. He was in good voice—he was in good spirits, in good beard, in good hat. He doesn't have just one voice—in fact, he doesn't seem to have an actual usual normal central singing voice at all: but he's got a growl, and a falsetto, and a tremolo, and a yip, and a sprechstimme, just a whole bunch of tricks in his Santa's bag, with which he can do most anything. His locks are snowy, his body comfortably rumpled and lumpy, he looks a merry old sage of a walrus, and softly wheezes like one between breath-groups, a fact that oddly adds to the effect, like a bourbon. "The last time I played here," he said, "I had a bad flu. I was on antibiotics, on antihistamines, I was taking -" (here he named a medication I didn't recognize, but the older heads in the audience nodded knowingly)—and I felt just awful. And I remember thinking: Twenty years ago I would have paid good money to feel this bad." A laugh of understanding from the audience, who too had smoked and snorted and imbibed before blending in with the New Economy, and who likewise these days mostly need no artificial assistance to feel awful.

For if folkies were once the young, the unshod and unshaven, now we are like the crabbed geezers we used to sing about, Old Dan Tucker and his tribe. I would gladly have tried to help pass this experience down to our own household's representative of the rising generation, but he was out on a mission of mercy, delivering pizzas to the hungry; and on past performance, would probably not have responded anyway. For not only is Van Ronk before *\*his\** time, he's almost before *\*my\** time. He kept regaling us with anecdotes from the fifties or even earlier. Some of them involved Jelly Roll Morton or Blind Boy Fuller and seemed to stretch back indefinitely by some kind of blues transmigration or apostolic chord progression. He sang a song he first heard at age fifteen from Brownie

McGee, about the wear and tear of late nights and the sporting life, which at the time he didn't dare sing himself, "as there would be a credibility problem; I hadn't paid my dues."

So he shelved the song and the years went on and every so often he'd take it down and consider and decide, "Nope, not yet, haven't paid enough dues." Then the seasons turned and the leaves turned brown, and he said to himself: "F\*ck the dues; I'm gonna sing it." So he cornered old Brownie in his dressing room and sang it for him, and received the songwriter's apostolic blessing to go forth and sing it on a stage. "By the way, Brownie," he asked, "how old were you when you wrote that song?"

Well, I guess you see it coming. "Fifteen."



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