

Dave Van Ronk, folk and blues artist, dead at 65

Fred Mazelis
14 February 2002

Dave Van Ronk, the acclaimed blues and folk singer, guitarist, songwriter and teacher, died February 10 at the age of 65. His death came three months after surgery for colon cancer.

In a career spanning more than 40 years, Van Ronk won the respect and affection of countless of his peers as well as fans in the US and around the world. His first album was recorded for Folkways Records in 1959, and was followed by more than two dozen others. He continued performing and teaching until the end of his life.

Van Ronk's musical style is not easily categorized. He called jazz his biggest influence, tracing it back to the days in the early 1950s when he haunted jazz clubs in New York and met the likes of Coleman Hawkins and Jimmy Rushing. He was also heavily influenced by the blues masters, recording his own version of classics by Blind Lemon Jefferson and other pioneers. His work was always marked by a reverence and serious study of what has come to be called American roots music.

He knew and worked with legendary performers like Odetta and Pete Seeger, as well as his own contemporaries and younger musicians—most famously Bob Dylan, along with Jack Elliott, Phil Ochs, Tom Paxton, Joni Mitchell, Janis Ian, Christine Lavin, Suzanne Vega and many others. Dylan often stayed with Van Ronk and his wife in the months after he arrived in New York's Greenwich Village at the age of 20 in 1961. Van Ronk, then 25, influenced the younger musician both through his technique on the guitar and in other ways, including urging him to read Bertolt Brecht and the French symbolist poets.

Though he worked with and respected Seeger, Peter, Paul and Mary and other folksingers, Van Ronk's work was somewhat different, broader and more varied. His repertory spanned the work of Louis Armstrong, Leonard Cohen, Randy Newman and blues masters like the Rev. Gary Davis. He drew from jazz, blues, folk and country.

Though he didn't usually perform "political" or protest songs, Van Ronk's political and intellectual outlook, shaped in the mid-twentieth century, informed his entire life and career.

Jon Pareles, pop music critic of the *New York Times*, writes in his obituary of Van Ronk's "sense of history, sense of humor and a gift for making fellow musicians feel at home." This is undoubtedly true, and it would not be an exaggeration to say that Van Ronk was beloved by thousands of his colleagues, as demonstrated by the outpouring of support for him when his illness was disclosed last fall.

The sense of history and where it came from, however, must be explained. For his whole life Van Ronk identified with the working class and expressed a hatred of capitalist exploitation and sympathy for socialism. In his teenage years he was attracted to the ideas of anarcho-syndicalism, and in the early 1960s he declared his agreement with the Trotskyist analysis and perspective. He joined the Workers League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, and remained associated with it until the end of the 1960s. In May 1998, Van Ronk had a long and wide-ranging conversation with WSWWS Arts Editor David Walsh [A conversation with Dave Van Ronk].

Born in Brooklyn in 1936, Van Ronk moved to Queens as a child and attended Richmond Hill High School. He dropped out of school at the age of 15, and was largely self-educated. A voracious reader, his broad knowledge and interests were communicated, though usually with typical self-deprecatory humor, both in conversation and performance.

Van Ronk joined the Merchant Marine as a teenager, and at the same time began hanging around Washington Square, in Greenwich Village, just as the folk revival movement that peaked in the early to mid-1960s was beginning to emerge. He performed at famous clubs like

the Gaslight and Folk City, which have long since left the scene. With his early recordings and performances it became clear that he was a major talent. Many of his best known songs and interpretations date from the 1960s, including “Cocaine Blues,” “You’re a Good Old Wagon,” “He Was a Friend of Mine,” “Stackerlee” and “House of the Rising Sun.”

As acoustic music and the folk revival declined in the late 1960s and 1970s, Van Ronk persevered with his work. He had never been interested in fame for its own sake, or in wealth for any sake at all. He briefly gave up performing in the mid-1970s but came back to it within a year, unable to part with that important part of his life’s work. He continued, adding to and developing his craft, neither simply discarding his past work nor merely repeating it. He remained open to new avenues for his whole career, something that fit completely with his attitude towards teaching guitar to successive generations of students.

Van Ronk’s last album, the jazz-influenced “Sweet and Lowdown,” was released only a year ago. Until he became ill, he continued to tour, singing before old and new audiences in clubs and coffeehouses around the country, as well as in Canada and Europe.

The admiration and love for Van Ronk was amply demonstrated when he became ill. A number of benefit concerts were held to assist him during his illness. Last November Arlo Guthrie, Tom Paxton and Peter, Paul and Mary performed at New York’s Bottom Line to raise funds for their friend.

Earlier, in December 1997, Van Ronk received the Lifetime Achievement Award of ASCAP, the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers. Nearly 100 fans and fellow musicians posted congratulatory messages at that time on the web site set up by the host of the award ceremony, Christine Lavin.

Dave Van Ronk’s musical legacy will live, not only in his many recordings, but in the thousands he taught and influenced in his course of his long career.



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