



REV. GARY DAVIS

EDITED AND TRANSCRIBED BY STEFAN GROSSMAN

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THE LIFE AND CAREER OF BLIND GARY DAVIS

by Bruce Bastin

"You must have religion in your soul," said Blind Gary Davis. It was the crux of his music; the music of a man who had seen the light. Like many talented folk musicians, Davis was always seeking to add runs and embellish notes, partly to demonstrate his complete mastery of the piece but partly as a comment on his own skills as a musician—a sense of professional pride. He was a brilliant musician who led a difficult life as a deeply religious performer.

One of eight children, only two of whom survived childhood, Gary Davis was born of farm stock in rural South Carolina on April 30th, 1896. Brought up by a grandmother, Davis was playing guitar by the time he was eight, and singing in the Baptist church. Two years later his father was killed, but by then Davis was leading a thoroughly independent life. He was a loner until his 40s, when he married.

By the time Davis was fifteen, he was playing in the Greenville string band, which included another superb guitarist, Willie Walker, whom Davis later rated a "master player." Within a few years, Davis was accepted at the Institution for the Education of the Deaf and Blind in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Although he did not remain there long, he taught music. Twenty-five years later, he told a welfare worker that he had never learned to read music "but presumed it was like other reading" (this and all other quotations are from Bruce Bastin, *Red River Blues* [University of Illinois Press 1986]) by which he meant Braille, which he had learned in the school for the blind.

For some years, Davis traveled throughout the Carolinas. He was known to the welfare authorities in Durham, North Carolina, as early as 1919, although he probably did not take up permanent residence there until 1931, when his mother settled in the town. A cable from the Superintendent of Public Welfare in Wilson, N.C. to his Durham counterpart, W.E. Stanley requested him to "meet Gary Davis blind and direct late night train." Soon after, Mr. Stanley wrote the Durham Chief of Police requesting a permit for Davis "to play guitar and sing in the colored section, Friday July 17th...for this date only." Years later, Browning McGhee also told of police permits being required.

In 1935, a new manager was brought in to run the United Dollar Store on Durham's West Club Boulevard. J.B. Long had recently acquired a taste for recording folk musicians—Black and White—while working in nearby Kinston. One day, hoping to attract farmers from the tobacco warehouse to his store, he heard a blind bluesman, Fulton Allen, playing the




guitar. During Long's summer vacation an improbable sextet headed for New York to record: Long, his wife and daughter, Blind Boy Fuller (Fulton Allen), Gary Davis, and George Washington. Washington, the only sighted Black, was Fuller's lead/guide, and also played guitar. The session was for the America Record Corporation (ARC) and Long was fortunate that the A & R manager was Edward Arthur Satherley. Art Satherley had come from England via the Wisconsin Chair Company, which issued perhaps the finest country blues of the 1920s on Paramount records, enabling him to mix easily with rural Black artists, who were sometimes confused by the unfamiliar studio environment. Washington, who recorded under the name of Bull City Red (Durham was called Bull City, after a local tobacco), sat behind the blind men to touch them on the arm, as a signal to the end the recording. Davis found it hard to stop inside 2½ minutes. Fuller, who learned many blues from records, found it easier.

The first session was held on Tuesday, July 23, 1935, commencing with a pair of tough blues from Davis, who by Thursday, refused to play any more blues. All his

GOIN' TO SIT DOWN ON THE BANKS OF THE RIVER

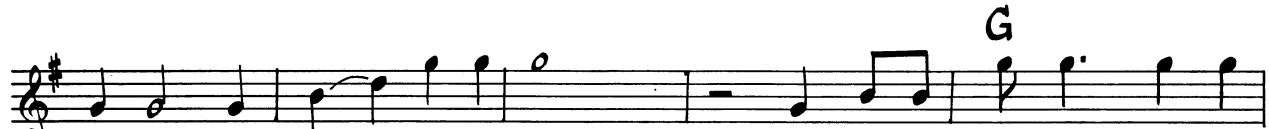
Words and Music by
REV. GARY DAVIS

G




I'M GON-NA RUN THROUGH THE STREETS OF THE CIT-Y WHERE

G



MY LORD HAS GONE ON BE-FORE I'M GON-NA SIT DOWN ON THE

C G D7 G



BANKS OF THE RIV-ER I WON'T BE BACK NO MORE



Photo courtesy of Don Schlitten.

I AM THE LIGHT OF THIS WORLD

Words and Music by
REV. GARY DAVIS

CHORUS

C F G

JUST AS LONG AS I'M IN THIS WORLD I AM THE LIGHT OF THIS

C F G

WORLD. JUST AS LONG AS I'M IN THIS WORLD I AM THE LIGHT OF THIS

1. C 2. C fine VERSE

WORLD - JUST AS LONG AS I'M WORLD WELL YOU DON'T BE-LIEVE IN

JE-SUS AND NOT A WORD IS SAID WHEN HE COME ALL WAY DOWN TO

D:G AL FINE

LAZA-RUS' GRAVE AND RAISE HIM FROM THE DEAD - JUST AS LONG AS I'M

I've got fiery fingers, and I've got fiery hands.
And when I get up in heaven, going to join that fiery band.

Chorus:

Prayer is the key of heaven, and faith unlocked the door.
That's why my God gave me the key and told me to carry it everywhere I go.

Chorus:

I know I got religion, I know I ain't ashamed.
For the Holy Ghost is my witness, and the angels done signed my name.

Chorus:

Didn't they take old John the Baptist, and put him in the kettle of oil.
My God got in there with him, and they tell me the oil wouldn't boil.

Chorus: