



# DAKOTA DAVE HULL

## interview

This interview with Jon Rodine appeared in the **CHORD**, Minneapolis, St. Cloud and Duluth, issue number 17, August 2002.

Dakota Dave Hull is an acoustic guitar master well-known to local and national music lovers. From his early days at the Coffeehouse Extempore playing with Sean Blackburn, to his recent years putting out albums on his own Arabica label, he's been an active and valuable presence in the Minnesota music world, and, even though he isn't officially a blues guitarist, we wanted to squeeze him into this issue anyway. This is because he's got a great new album out in stores right now, entitled *Sheridan Square Rag*, and we wanted to plug it. It's a wonderfully sublime album of solo guitar (except for two duets with Dave's familiar partner, Kari Larson) and is highly recommended to any fans of guitar, specifically (ala Leo Kottke or Pat Donohue, John Fahey or Doc Watson), or great American music in general.

Dave is familiar with the blues, of course, as he is with most other styles in the American music constellation: folk, country, ragtime, jazz, gospel, you name it. And his new record shows this intimacy with so many traditions, but not in any way that ever seems quaint or pedantic. It's a heartfelt and very spiritual piece of work, covering traditional gospel and hymns, folk and blues, western songs, Woody Guthrie, the Carter Family, as well as including some fine, moving original tunes like *Ocelia* and *Yellow Medicine*. The album is dedicated to Dave's old friend Dave Van Ronk, who passed away recently, and this might in part account for the depth of feeling it contains, in songs like *Navy Hymn*, *Talk About Suffering*, and others. Dave was kind enough to respond to some questions about his latest project:

*CHORD: The record is dedicated to Dave Van Ronk, whose friendship meant a lot to you—had you started working on it before he became ill, or was it conceived as a kind of tribute to him? And how did you meet Dave, anyway?*

DDH: Many of the tunes on the record were written or arranged before Dave got sick. The title tune *Sheridan Square Rag* was named after Dave's street in Greenwich Village in honor of Dave. I like to write tunes for friends and I'm very happy to say that Dave heard (and liked) this tune. When Dave got sick the concept of the album started to take shape. I sure wish he'd gotten to hear it. I started running into Dave at festivals in the mid 1970s and we kind of hit it off. I'd stay at his place in NYC, and he'd stay at my place here. I think I have learned more about music from that guy than any other single human. While he didn't exactly turn me on to classic ragtime, he certainly was a big help in my understanding the idiom and how it works. The first rag that I recorded (in the 1980s) was Dave's *Antelope Rag*. We also got a kick out of showing each other the newest guitar stuff we'd each worked out. A big honor for me was playing on his *For All My Friends in Far-Flung Places* album in the mid '90s. I got my first Van Ronk album when I was 13 or 14 years old (a fact that I took great delight in reminding him every chance I got). He became an incredibly close friend. I think if you ask anyone that knew him you'd get a similar answer—there wasn't a mean-spirited bone in his body. He was such a help to so many people; some who became pretty big names, others who didn't. It didn't matter. The generosity was there. If you looked at a list of his guitar students you'd see plenty of recognizable names. And his cooking! My God! He could have made a better living as a chef in a high-class joint, I think. He really was that good. Mostly, though, what I remember was his mind—the retention of facts, ideas and conversations was nearly 100%, and I swear I'm not exaggerating. Damn, I miss him.

*CHORD: Could you say a little about the fingerpicking aspect of the album, which is a bit of a departure for you?*

DDH: Well, I started out as a fingerpicker and I never really let that slide completely. Dave and a few others had been encouraging me to do an entire album of this stuff, so I did. Really, to me, it's all music. You do what the tune calls for. I've been doing more solo gigs lately, and the fingerstyle stuff is very well suited to that, while playing with a plectrum is usually better with at least one other person, like the work I do with Kari Larson.

*CHORD: What about some other guitar players who've been consistently (or recently) inspiring to you?*

DDH: Gosh, that's a hard one. This is a great town for guitar players. Turn any corner and you'll find a better one. I almost hate to start naming names because I'll leave someone out for sure, but Pat Donahue, Phil Heywood, Dave Ray, Pop Wagner, Tim Sparks, Dean Magraw

and Lee Tedrow all come to mind off the top of my head. I've been very lucky to play with Kari Larson for several years—we've learned a ton from each other. I've also gotten to play with and know quite a few great players like Doc Watson, Duck Baker, Norman Blake, David Rawlings and John Renbourn. The other thing I'd like to say on this subject to any guitarists that are reading this is this: listen to other instruments. Pianos, fiddles, trumpets, whatever. If you steal from them you're a lot less likely to get caught.

*CHORD: You've also done your radio show on KFAI for quite some time, and you're a fan of many different kinds of music—anything you've been digging a lot lately, new or old?*

DDH: There's music on at my house all the time. Old and new. Anytime Yazoo comes out with a new compilation disk I have to have it. The old stuff from the '20s and '30s really floats my boat. They use the Anthology of American Folk Music (on Smithsonian Folkways) as a model, combining styles of music, and they do it very well. (If you don't have the Anthology, put it at the top of your list. Get it ASAP; you need it.) I don't think they've had a clinker yet. The cool thing about being alive right now is that all this stuff is available. We had the Resophonic guitar festival earlier this month and I was really blown away by a guy from Duluth, Charlie Parr. He writes in the blues tradition as well as doing some old stuff. He gets it. There is so much good stuff out there, old and new. I've been doing the radio show on KFAI for five or six years and I'm lucky to be able to share the music I love with the community at large. Amazingly, there seems to be an audience for it. It's really gratifying.

*CHORD: Your old partner Sean Blackburn from the Coffeehouse Extempore days—what's he up to?*

DDH: Sean lives in Denver and plays music with a woman named Liz Masterson. I see him every year or so. He's doing well. He owns a couple of horses.

*CHORD: Speaking of the Extemp, how did you get started with the guitar, and end up in the Twin Cities?*

DDH: I got hold of a guitar when I was about ten years old and never let go. I grew up in Fargo, and when I graduated from high school in 1968 I started coming to the Twin Cities more and more often. Finally, in 1969 I just stayed. At that time, as now, the cities were a hotbed of great guitar players. The Coffeehouse Extempore was going strong. It wasn't like the coffeehouses of today; it was actually more of a hangout with several rooms in addition to a performance area. Most of the local musicians hung out there at night and showed each other the latest licks we'd figured out. The sense of camaraderie was incredible—we were all in the same boat. Once a month you'd get your gig there. That was really where I learned about performance. I wish the musicians today had a place like that to hang.

*CHORD: And what about that Kel Kroydon guitar on the CD sleeve? That's a pretty unique-looking instrument.*

DDH: That guitar was made by Gibson around 1930. It was one of their budget lines, but in every way it's the equal of any Gibson from that period—a marvelous instrument. The stencil of the stylized birds on the top are original to the guitar. I've seen three or four of them, but this one makes my socks roll up and down. Not only a great instrument, but an actual piece of art.

*CHORD: Tell us a little about your home studio.*

DDH: Well, I got into having a studio in my basement a couple of years ago. For years I recorded with Leo Whitebird over at P.O.D. Recording and would mix with Steve Wiese at Creation Audio. While this was workable and I was happy with the results, Leo was on me to build my own. Essentially he built it for me. It's allowed me to really concentrate on recording acoustic instruments and singers and attempt to get that wonderful natural sound. It's a good sounding room and I'm very satisfied with the results. In addition to my own recent CD and my work with Kari Larson I've recorded Pop Wagner, the Cagley, Schafer, Black and Njoes album on Copper Creek, and right now I'm working on a new album by Cam Waters. Among other things. I still like to mix with Steve (at Creation Audio)—he brings out the best in this stuff in my opinion.

*CHORD: Maybe you could say something about coffee, as I seem to notice a certain coffee theme that keeps popping up, if one examines your recorded music catalog.*

DDH: (Laughter) Well, I always thought if you're gonna be alive you might as well stay awake and enjoy it. I started getting interested in coffee in the late '70s. In 1980 I met the late Don Lohr who was my first coffee guru. He taught me the art of home roasting and really gave me an appreciation of the incredible variety that's available. Where it's grown, year of the crop, how dark it's roasted and lots of other variables. My second coffee guru is Ed Dunn of Dunn Brothers fame. I learned a lot from him, too. There's always good coffee at my house.

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