

DAVEY GRAHAM



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1962-2008</i>	<i>Folk</i>	<i>Take Five (1963)</i>

Only Solitaire

Artist: *Davey Graham*

Years: *1963-1964*

George Starostin's Reviews

Page contents:

- [The Guitar Player](#) (1963)
- [FOLK ROOTS, NEW ROUTES](#) (1964)



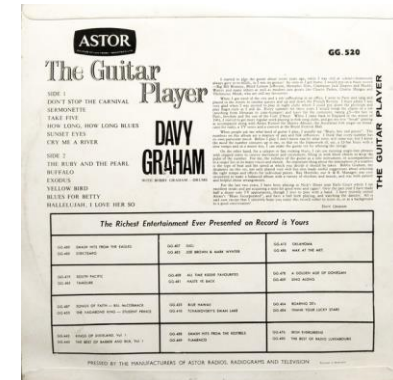
THE GUITAR PLAYER

Album released:

1963

V A L U E
4 4 3 5 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Don't Stop The Carnival; 2) Sermonette; 3) Take Five; 4) How Long, How Long Blues; 5) Sunset Eyes; 6) Cry Me A River; 7) The Ruby And The Pearl; 8) Buffalo; 9) Exodus; 10) Yellow Bird; 11) **Blues For Betty**; 12) Hallelujah, I Love Her So.

REVIEW

I have no reason to think that Davey Graham's **Guitar Player** was the first instrumental acoustic folk album to be released on English soil (although everything I have heard from earlier years was vocal), but it almost certainly was the first, and one of the best, experimental / artistic acoustic folk albums to come out of the UK. In fact, calling it «folk» is a bit of an understatement, given that about half of the compositions come from the jazz market, and the other half is rooted in British folk, American folk, American blues, Latin music, and whatever else I failed to notice.

First and foremost, the album is called **The Guitar Player**, not **The Folk Musician** or **The People's Artist** or whatever, and if there is one particular thing that it chronicles, it is pure, sincere, and loyal love between a musician and his instrument, regardless of any specific genre or style barriers. In an era where most people's idea of somebody playing an acoustic guitar was Big Bill Broonzy, or Pete Seeger, or at least Lonnie Donegan (over on this side of the Atlantic), seeing somebody outside the highly specialized world of classical guitar use the acoustic as a self-sufficient means in itself was a rare marvel indeed, and many times a rare marvel if it were used with such total unpredictability and freedom.



Graham was not a technical virtuoso, and his aim with these instrumentals is never to dazzle the listener with lightning-speed playing, impossible chord combinations, or any special tricks. Instead, his aim is to demonstrate the emotional power of acoustic guitar and, if possible, draw your complete attention to it. This is already evident in his first well-known composition, 'Angi' (= 'Angie', 'Anji'), which is not on this record but was released on a three-song EP from 1962 (a re-recorded version from the 1970s is appended to the CD edition of **Guitar Player** as a bonus) — a short, repetitive piece which may not seem like much to the modern jaded listener, but back in the 1960s was the hottest thing around, most notably covered by Bert Jansch and then by Simon & Garfunkel (who actually thought it was *written* by Bert). Its bit of mystique is probably rooted in that it is even unclear which genre it is. Blues? Jazz? Folk? The rhythm seems jazzy, the main guitar hook is bluesy, yet the overall mood is closer to dark folk. Proper musicological analysis will give you a formal explanation, but the heart of the matter is that 'Angi' is Davy Graham in a nutshell — two minutes of lovely acoustic guitar which does not subscribe to any specific line of convention.

On the album itself, Graham is joined by notorious session drummer Bobby Graham (ironically, no relation) — one of the few players, apparently, who could keep up with him in all of his genre-defying endeavors — and nobody else. About half of the numbers, as I already said, are jazz covers, and these folkified renditions of Cannonball Adderley's 'Sermonette' and Teddy Edwards' 'Sunset Eyes' go a long way towards demonstrating the shared musical roots of sophisticated jazz and hillbilly dance music — though, admittedly, Davy can also hit upon trickier tempos and come up with something more exquisite and less accessible, for instance, when transcribing Brubeck's 'Take Five': reduced to a barebones two-minute long musical skeleton, the composition becomes melancholic and meditative even if it still retains the speed of the original. But he is actually even more inventive when it comes to schmaltzy material — thus, 'The Ruby & The Pearl', a song originally recorded as a slow, sappy, heavily orchestrated ballad by Nat King Cole, is reinvented as a Mexican number (replete with Bobby clacking those castanets), probably not very impressive on its own but quite hilarious when played next to the original, just for the sake of comparison.

At the same time, Davy gives us his take on the old urban blues tradition (Leroy Carr's 'How Long, How Long Blues', played with all the confidence of a Delta player, if not with the actual spirit), saves a spot for classic Ray Charles-style R&B ('Hallelujah, I Love Her So'), and dares to include one of his own compositions — 'Blues For Betty', which might seem like an ordinary blues shuffle at first, but dig in closer and you will notice Davey throwing in little classical flourishes and bits of dissonance, and generally going unpredictable places which probably would not be on the minds of too many traditional bluesmen. It's all done modestly and completely without flashiness, so it might be hard to spot — and it is this very lack of

flash that prevented Davy Graham from ever becoming a household name; but it also rewards patient and attentive listeners, though I confess that I personally do not have *that* much patience and attention to become a full-on admirer as some fans do, probably because this relatively «academic» approach to the guitar is not my favorite kind of approach. But then again, this is at least «inventive academic» as opposed to «conservative academic», graced by the addition of intrigue and unpredictability rather than religious purism.

An important detail is that, back at the time, Graham's recordings must have sounded particularly fresh and unusual to listeners and musicians alike due to his adoption of the D-A-D-G-A-D tuning, which is now sometimes nicknamed «Celtic tuning» but which he himself apparently nicked from Moroccan music during his stay in the country. To the modern listener, this is such a standard practice, employed by most players of Celtic folk or Celtic-inspired pop/rock music ('Kashmir', etc.), that it would be hard to believe this kind of sound was not heard from acoustic guitar players before Graham — but apparently, it is just so. However, if I am not mistaken, only a few tracks on this particular album are in that tuning; the most notable example from Davy's early years is his Eastern-influenced rendition of 'She Moved Through The Fair', which is not included here.

The most common CD release of the album on the market is a little bizarre, adding half an hour's worth of excellent bonus tracks that make an even better showcase for Davy's amazing genre range — but all of these tracks are from much later periods (a brief live rendition of 'Anji' from 1976, and even more live performances that date back to the 1990s): the nearly eight-minute long 'She Moved Thru' The Bizarre / Blue Raga', as you can probably guess from the title already, is a fascinating juxtaposition of British folk and Eastern raga, but I am not exactly sure what this track, recorded in 1997, has to do in this particular location — and why they could not have included the rare original recording of 'She Moved Through The Fair' instead.





FOLK ROOTS, NEW ROUTES

(w. Shirley Collins)

Album released:
March 1964

V A L U E
3 4 3 5 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Nottamun Town; 2) Proud Maisrie; 3) The Cherry Tree Carol; 4) Blue Monk; 5) Hares On The Mountain; 6) Reynardine; 7) Pretty Saro; 8) Rif Mountain; 9) Jane, Jane; 10) Love Is Pleasin'; 11) Boll Weevil, Holler; 12) Hori Horo; 13) Bad Girl; 14) Lord Gregory; 15) Grooveyard; 16) Dearest Dear.

REVIEW

I am not the world's biggest fan of Dame Shirley Collins; indeed, I find it hard to understand how it would be possible to actually «love» Shirley Collins for being Shirley Collins, rather than merely a hard-working, dedicated, respectable vessel for preserving and publicizing the British folk song tradition. Her classic early records from the late Fifties, such as **Sweet England** and **False True Lovers**, have inarguably influenced and inspired the folk revival, as well as all sorts and varieties of folk-rock from Fairport Convention to Led Zeppelin. But she herself had always stressed that her role was that of a minimally involved medium between the song and the listener — which would pretty much make any single description of any single Shirley Collins record more of a meditation on the roots, the nature, and the impact of specific folk songs than anything personal. In other words, I would surely amend Billy Bragg's oft-quoted reference to Shirley Collins as "one of England's greatest cultural treasures" to "one of England's greatest cultural treasurers" — that single *r* actually makes a big difference.



That said, Shirley Collins was not really some sort of stiff-collared Victorian prude who would hold up her academically conservative treatment of folk legacy with religious fervor: every once in a while she would agree to collaborate with various musicians who had their own agenda (such as Ashley Hutchings' Albion Band, for instance), acting as an anchor of stability

in a potentially (though, as a rule, quite modestly) experimental setting. In such collaborative projects she actually becomes somewhat more interesting herself — which is why this album, pairing her up with one of folk music's biggest iconoclasts, is unquestionably one of the most intriguing, if not *the* most intriguing, steps in her career.

But see, I have actually almost allowed myself to fall into the usual trap: the majority of retro reviews of this poorly remembered, but well-respected classic LP tend to concentrate on Shirley Collins, just briefly commenting on Graham's work as her sideman. This is not something that would probably happen in the classical world (I have a hard time imagining how a review of, say, a recording of Schubert's *Winterreise* could focus almost exclusively on the singer and forget about the pianist next to him, especially if the pianist were of the caliber of Sviatoslav Richter), but it may be generally excused for the world of traditional folk music, where words and the way they are delivered have always been treasured over the generic and usually predictable music patterns to which they were set.

The funny thing is that with the aptly titled **Folk Roots, New Routes** this trope is inverted: a single serious listen will clearly reveal that Davy is firmly in charge of the proceedings, while Shirley is essentially a sidekick. First, there is the little matter of the setlist — which does, it is true, to a large degree consist of (largely untraditional) recordings of traditional folk music; but it also happens to contain Graham's solo acoustic guitar arrangements of Thelonious Monk's 'Blue Monk' (!) and an obscure composition called 'Grooveyard', by jazz pianist Bobby Timmons. The 'Blue Monk' cover is particularly stunning in how neatly it captures the groove of Monk's main theme, and then seamlessly transforms it into what could have been mistaken for a little creative improvisation from an old Delta bluesman — at the same time preserving the spirit of Monk's weird harmony experiments at his piano. The big question, however, is — what exactly is a thing like that doing on an album of vocal folk covers? Is it *merely* to provide a grateful (or gratuitous) spotlight for the accompanying musician, or is it to accommodate some sort of grand vision that goes way beyond loyal coverage of royal heritage?

Now to answer *this* question, we must cast a wider net and look at the actual covers. A good introductory example would be 'Pretty Saro', a long-forgotten melancholic British ballad allegedly revived in the Appalachians, and then re-imported by Shirley into her own native country — except that Graham seems to ironically misread the title as 'Pretty Sarod', and proceed to reinvent it as a cross between a Western ballad and an Indian raga, while Shirley nonchalantly delivers the lyrics precisely the way they are supposed to be delivered. This musical equivalent of an interracial marriage is fresh and lovely, with the slow and meditative Eastern pulse of the arrangement agreeing surprisingly well with the brooding spirit of the old song itself; and as if to strengthen his synthetic point, Graham immediately follows it with 'Rif Mountain', his own

instrumental composition drawing upon the musical experience he'd picked up during his stay in Morocco with the local musicians. Everything's pretty Moroccan about it, except it's all played on a regular acoustic guitar — and if you enjoy that sort of approach on your Jimmy Page records, there is nothing wrong to check out Jimmy's foremost inspiration, who did it earlier and with just as much, if not more, verve and professionalism.

On other tracks, Graham largely prefers to stay within more Western territory, but this often means taking *Western* quite literally. Thus, the arrangement for 'Proud Maisrie' (an old Scottish ballad also known as 'The Gardener Child') seems to follow a regular old folk chord progression at first, but then Graham begins to embellish the melody with bluesy phrasing copped from Robert Johnson's records, creating rather jarring dissonant impressions that break up the lullaby-like monotony which so often plagues stereotypical folk ballads. Right after that comes 'The Cherry Tree Carol', for which Davy (for once!) trades in his guitar for a banjo, sitting his ass down on the porch of his winter home in the mountains and playing his instrument with a certain confidently amateurish flair, as opposed to the aura of deep experience which usually flows from his guitar performances.

This could be continued and expanded to almost each of these tracks — it's just that at this point, a certain amount of technical and musicological knowledge vastly exceeding mine would be needed to disclose all the nifty secrets of this record. But do believe me when I say that in order to be charmed and wooed by its unusualness, all you have to do in advance is sit down with a «generic» Shirley Collins record on which she plays the guitar herself: the difference will hit you like a ton of bricks. I even feel a bit sorry for Shirley: she always does her job well — but there is a goddamn reason why Graham actually gets to have three solo numbers on this collaborative record, while she only performs one number ('Lord Gregory') a cappella. It is quite transparently clear who is the «folk roots» and who is the «new routes» on this album — although, in the end, it is precisely the combination of the two (my favorite sort of combination!) which makes the whole experience so admirable. If it weren't for the extremely limited appeal of the folk genre as a whole, the record could have become a major classic: as it is, it remains more of a cult favorite for the select few, but then I guess that this is precisely how the select few would like it to stay, and I sort of get their point.

