

Rory Block:

Recalling a magical time when a teenaged Rory Block learned from a master, here's her tribute to the seminal music of the Reverend Gary Davis

Stony Plain releases *I Belong to the Band*, the fourth in the American guitarist's recreations of the work of the classic blues artists of the past

"I cried during the recording of this CD," recalls Rory Block. "Memories of a precious time came swirling back; I was overwhelmed with powerful emotions. This was a time when people like the Reverend Gary Davis could be visited in person — at home — and one could take face-to-face lessons. It was nothing sort of a magical time of discovery, of falling in love..."

And fall in love with the music she did. At fourteen years old she would travel to Davis' home with her friend Stefan Grossman, absorbing the music and the atmosphere as he learned his lessons in the Reverend's living room.

And now, more than 45 years later, the teenager is one of the most thoughtful, accomplished country blues guitarists on the planet and the good Reverend has passed — leaving his inspired music as a touchstone — and is hopefully playing his Gibson J200 guitar in the heavenly band.

On her latest CD for the roots music label Stony Plain, Rory Block has recreated Davis' gospel music with drive and energy on *I Belong to the Band*. It's her latest tribute to the music of the giants whose songs, style and spirit she seeks to keep brilliantly alive.

I Belong to the Band is her third album for Stony Plain in what she calls her "Mentor Series," and it's a joyful, emotional companion for *Blues Walkin' Like a Man: A Tribute to Son House* and *Shake 'Em On Down: A Tribute to Mississippi Fred McDowell*. (Her first "tribute" album, *The Lady and Mr. Johnson*, was released by Rykodisc in 2006; it offered 13 Robert Johnson songs.)

This recording presented special challenges to the performer. For a start, while the Reverend was certainly deeply influenced by Delta country blues, almost all his repertoire was based on traditional gospel songs. His playing was complex, full of unusual chords, counter-point rhythms, yelps, unexpected breaks and lyrical surprises — and for Rory, his style was very different from the other country blues artists with whom she had become familiar.

The Reverend Gary Davis was born in the closing years of the 19th century; he was 76 when he died in 1972. He made his first recordings in 1935 in Durham, North Carolina, but didn't make an album until 1954, by which time he had migrated to New York City. As part of the folk music revival, he recorded prolifically and performed at most of the major North American festivals, including Newport and, in Canada, the Mariposa Folk Festival. His songs were popularized by many artists, but most significantly by Peter, Paul & Mary, whose version of "Samson & Delilah" became a folk standard.

Growing up with the blues

As a young teenager Rory Block — her full name is Aurora — grew up in New York's Greenwich Village at the height of the "folk revival." At 14, already an accomplished guitarist, she discovered the Delta blues — then part of the wide world of folk music. She vividly remembers hearing Son House at the Village Gate; she recalls — in the new CD's extensive liner notes — meeting the Reverend Gary Davis. And, indeed, there's a moving pen and ink sketch she did when he visited her apartment with her friend Stefan Grossman.

Her first recordings (under the pseudonym Sunshine Kate) were made for Elektra Records, but she didn't return to the studio until 1975, when she recorded for RCA Victor and Chrysalis before signing to Rounder Records, for whom she cut more than a dozen albums. She has also recorded for a number of other labels, in between endless tour schedules.

Along the way, she has won five W.C. Handy Awards (now known simply as Blues Awards) from the Blues Foundation, two for "Traditional Blues Female Artist," and three for "Acoustic Blues Album of the Year." She's earned a gold record in Holland, and toured from one end of the United States to the other end of Canada, not to mention Poland, Norway, Italy and half a dozen more European countries.

Everywhere she plays, audiences are touched by the depth of her commitment to the music. Critical plaudits always follow the applause: *The New York Times* put it plainly enough: "Her playing is perfect, her singing otherworldly as she wrestles with ghosts, shadows and legends." And *Guitar Extra* added: "Rory Block has become one of the world's most important preservers of the roots of American music. She has become a national treasure in the form of an uncompromising mature blues artist."

The advance reviews for *I Belong to the Band* have been uniformly positive. Mark Tucker, on the FAME website, wrote: "This is the pinnacle of the woman's career; it may be that (she) has redefined what it means to pay proper tribute to the elder masters. This is hauntingly accurate, soul deep, and moving." The UK magazine *Blues & Rhythm* called the CD "a real triumph" and Parcbench.com called it "liberating and exhilarating."

The response from blues societies around the world has been equally enthusiastic. The Billtown Blues Society's newsletter in Pennsylvania, wrote: "Having had the opportunity to sit with the master in her youth, she soaked up elements of Davis' style like a sponge. This CD is a beautiful piece, immaculately played and delivered with power, authority and a love that is obvious from beginning to end."

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