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“You got any?” Jack Elliott asks, finishing a verse of “Talking Blues.”

“Nope,” Derroll Adams replies.

The banjo and guitar go on playing for a few seconds, marking time.

“Yup,” Derroll says, and launches into his verse.

This is the way folk albums used to be recorded: The musicians would go into the studio with a bottle of whiskey or whatever else suited their fancy, and they'd sing a bunch of songs. “We didn't rehearse anything,” Jack remembers. “We just sort of said, ‘Why don't we do this song?’ ‘How about this one?’” That was it. It wasn't an elaborately conceived artistic statement, it was just what they happened to feel like singing right then. When the musicians were good enough and the mood was right, those albums had a loose, freewheeling energy that

no amount of careful planning can ever hope to duplicate.

Jack Elliott and Derroll Adams had been singing and playing together since the early 1950s, when they happened to cross paths in Topanga Canyon, north of Los Angeles. Jack had come out West from New York following the trail of Woody Guthrie, while Derroll had come down from Oregon. Jack was playing guitar, Derroll was playing banjo, and they hit it off as soon as they met.

In 1955, Jack and his new wife, June, headed across to London just in time to catch the height of the “skiffle” boom. “I had an instant lot of good luck over there, more gigs than ever in my whole life before,” he remembers. “That's when I first really became a professional working musician, playing in some of these skiffle clubs and folk clubs.”

Soon Jack sent Derroll a ticket on an

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ocean liner, and the two set to making music in earnest. “As soon as Derroll arrived, we sang at a club that night, and for the next few months we played clubs about nine nights a week. We did a lot of great performances together, and that was the start of a fabulous six years touring Europe on motor scooters.”

They also recorded some three or four albums, before Jack headed back to the U.S. in time to be a model for Bob Dylan and a whole bunch of other young folksingers. Derroll stayed on in Europe, turning up in Dylan’s **Don’t Look Back** film and touring the U.S. once with Donovan, who had taken him as something of a model, and today is settled outside Antwerp, Belgium. He has recorded a few albums, but remains unknown to most Americans, except possibly for his song “Portland Town,” which Joan

Baez featured for years.

Jack, of course, went on to become a folk legend. His return was hailed far and wide, and he was accepted as the heir to Woody Guthrie, whom he had accompanied on the road and on whom he had based much of his style. He was also admired as a rakish role model, a genuine ramblin’ man who cared more about horses, cowboys, trucks and sailing ships than about his musical career. His stories would stretch out, curl around and drag the listener in, mixing surrealist imagery and dry cowboy humor, and the stories about him were even wilder than the ones he told.

Today, Jack is still going very strong. He won a Grammy in 1996 for his *South Coast* album, followed up with *Friends of Mine*, an album of duets with everyone from Arlo Guthrie to Emmylou Harris to Tom Waits,

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and in 1998 went to the White House to receive the National Medal of Arts. Living in the San Francisco Bay area, he continues to sing and play with the same exuberance that took England by storm almost 45 years ago.

This album shows Jack in his early years, singing the same sort of mixed country repertoire that he had performed with Guthrie.

“Woody liked my guitar playing and invited me to join him in a group he was gonna start with Cisco Houston, a little trio,” Jack remembers. “That group never did get started, but I got to sing a lot of songs with Woody, and they weren’t all Woody Guthrie songs. Most of the stuff we sang was old Carter Family songs and things like that.”

Jack and Derroll’s duets often recall those Guthrie made ten years earlier with Houston, sharing the same blend of keen musical sense and good-time feel. Most of the

songs are from the old-time country tradition, with a leavening of quirky gems like “Cigarettes & Whiskey,” with Jack singing in his raw cowboy tenor and Derroll reciting a verse in the ponderous tones of a country sermon. Jack takes pretty much all the lead vocals, with Derroll adding his rumbling baritone on the choruses when he feels like it. On the instrumental side, Derroll’s banjo takes the melody and weaves and dodges around the singing, with Jack playing solid rhythm licks on guitar.

Jack also takes a couple of solo numbers, showing off his anarchically swinging ragtime blues approach on “Salty Dog Blues” (with a truly bizarre scat solo) and “San Francisco Blues,” a song that would go on to become a folk standard in versions that often owed as much to Jack as to the song’s originator, Jesse “Lone Cat” Fuller.

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Jack would polish and refine his style somewhat over the years, but all the pieces were already in place when he and Derroll walked into that London recording studio, and this music still sounds as fresh as when it first appeared. One of the most idiosyncratically adept musicians and greatest spirits around, he was a master already in his 20s, and these sides are about as much fun to listen to as anything on record.



Liner notes by Elijah Wald

Mastered by Anton Glovsky, Grapeshot Studios

Cover photograph: Jack Elliot, Washington Square  
circa 1955 by © George Pickow/Michael Ochs  
Archives/Venice, CA

Design by Hadley Stern

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## PROGRAM

1. **More Pretty Girls Than One**  
(Woody Guthrie) Woody Guthrie Publications Inc. (BMI) 2:00
2. **Roll On Buddy**  
(Traditional) 2:30
3. **Death of John Henry**  
(Traditional) 2:29
4. **Salty Dog Blues**  
(Traditional) 2:47
5. **Talking Blues** 2:32
6. **I'm Gonna Walk The Street In Glory** 1:46
7. **Cigarettes & Whiskey**  
(Traditional) 2:00
8. **Danville Girl**  
(Traditional) 2:44
9. **Worried Man Blues**  
(A.P. Carter) APRS (BMI) 3:31
10. **San Francisco Bay Blues**  
(Jesse Fuller) TR0-Hollis Music (BMI) 1:56
11. **Roll In My Sweet Baby's Arms** 2:31
12. **I'm Going Down The Road**  
(Traditional) 2:03