



Photo courtesy Rediffusion, London

Derroll Adams-- Banjo Pickin' Expatriate

By Bill Yaryan

The story of Derroll Adams could begin with the year he arrived in Los Angeles with his banjo in the early 1950's and met up with a group of young, unknown singers of folk music; among them Odetta, Guy Carawan and Frank Hamilton. His most important friend for the story would be Jack Elliott, for Jack and he became "rambling buddies." But because Derroll has been an expatriate in Europe since 1957, he is little known in America and his reputation in the U.S. has been

made by the singers he met in California, and by the people who have heard him and played with him in Brussels and London. This reputation, for one who has never met him or heard the records he recorded with Jack in London and Milan, takes the appearance of a legend. He is a banjo player and singer in the tradition of Bascom Lamar Lunsford, a creative musician who has evolved an extremely personal style firmly rooted in country music. He is also an eccentric iconoclast, an unusual character whose life dwarfs the creations in two-dimensional beatnik fiction.

This life, with its heightened pleasures and tragedy, began long before he made his way to Los Angeles where he became part of the World Folk Artists group. But because his life has provided the platform for his music, which concerns us here, his story must begin earlier.

Derroll Lewis Thompson was born in Portland, Oregon the day after Thanksgiving in 1925, to Gertrude Thompson, whose ancestors had come to the northwest by covered wagon from Arkansas, and her husband Tom, an ex-vaudeville juggler from Maine who carved tomb-

stones when he wasn't drunk. His mother had been reading an adventure story about a Captain Derroll just before his birth. She left Tom because of his drinking and married Jack Glenn, a truck driver. But Jack beat Derroll with his belt buckle and she left him. George Adams was a tenant in the house where she went to live with Derroll and her mother. Adams, a salesman and inventor in his spare time from Takoma, Washington, gave Derroll eight pennies for some candy and the small boy persuaded his mother that here was a likely father prospect. They were married and Derroll took his surname.

Much of Derroll's childhood was spent in the back seat of a car. His stepfather, after studying civil engineering at night school, got a job on the Bonneville Dam power line. He took his family with him and when not working they hired themselves out as fruit pickers throughout the northwest. Although Derroll's parents were not musical, the car radio was always turned on and they liked to listen to "Grand Ole Opry." Derroll fell in love with the sound of the banjo. "Although I'd never seen one before," he said, "I figured out that it must have five strings." In the orchards he listened to the other pickers sing, and his mother bought him a harmonica so he could make his own music.

As a child, Derroll thought he would like to be an airplane pilot or a criminal lawyer. He also loved cowboys. Film star Buck Jones was his hero, as well as Lefty Carson, an ex-cowboy who worked in a Portland clothing store in full-dress. Kids at school called Derroll "Tex" because he wore cowboy clothes. On a fruit-picking trip he acquired the habit of chewing tobacco from some retired farmers outside a feed store. Perhaps he had his father's vaudeville blood, because he loved to tell stories in front of his school class about his family's travels, making true facts funny rather than inventing tall yarns. He took part in school plays, once as Lincoln, and he imagined himself to be Maurice Chevalier. "I used to juggle money in my pocket, just like he did, kiss women's hands, and dance down the street."

When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Derroll was sixteen and a typical adolescent who was sick of home and in need of adventure. Lying about his age, he joined the Army. But his absence was reported to the police and broadcast over the radio. George Adams was summoned but agreed to let him stay. Instead of overseas adventure, Derroll laid mines off the Pacific coast from a converted ferry. Unexpectedly, he was given a minority discharge after five months and sent home. Within the year, he married a school classmate and joined the Coast Guard in San Francisco. There he was

assigned to a naval landing force and trained in judo, deep-sea diving, bayoneting and knife fighting. His destroyer was going overseas when its main shaft broke and the ship headed back for coast duty.

In the Navy Derroll shaved his head (they called him "Moon") and began wearing an ear ring. Although he spent much of his time with sailors from the south, playing his harmonica with them and learning their songs, he hated the Navy. Constant calls to battle stations made him nervous and the teasing by his shipmates because of his religious beliefs brought him to the edge of a nervous breakdown and finally pushed him over. "My mother believed in Unity and faith healing," he explained, "and I used to keep pin-up pictures of Jesus in our car. Once I healed an old woman by praying with her. I told people I thought that God was love and everywhere, and that there wasn't any heaven or hell, and they laughed at me." One night, Derroll took a knife and went after a lieutenant who was particularly cruel. He was stopped in time but was sent to the hospital on Treasure Island in San Francisco. Once there he found he couldn't remember what bothered him and his illness was diagnosed as "psychoneurosis anxiety."

"The war reduced me," Derroll said. "I realized that I had to go out and kill people, and that I might die. We didn't do any fighting, but we always had to be prepared, and the tension was terrible. I became afraid of everything. Before the war I'd lived in a cozy niche, believing everything anybody told me. But the war made me feel that the world was full of lies."

Derroll told the doctors that he wanted to do nothing else but grow flowers and paint pictures, so they released him with instructions to take it easy for a year and "learn to laugh." He returned to Portland, became a father for the first time, and enrolled at Museum Art School, an extension of Reed College. "I'd decided to be an art teacher and teach the eskimos," he said.

Derroll studied other things as well as art. He joined the Vedanta Society, tried various drugs, kept his ear ring and grew a beard, joined the Progressive Party to campaign for Henry Wallace, and held Marxist classes at his studio. Most of his time was taken up with the banjo, an ancient instrument which his mother had bought from a blind lady to cheer him up on his return home. The first professional singer he heard was Josh White, at a college concert, and he listened to records by bluegrass groups and the Carter Family, as well as by Burl Ives, Roy Acuff, Pete Seeger, Cousin Emmy, Woody Guthrie, Bascom Lunsford, Cisco Houston, Doc Boggs and Buell Kazee. "I guess I was the first banjo-

playing folk singer in Oregon," Derroll said. "I didn't know how to tune the thing and had to invent my own way. At first I sang the country songs I'd heard when I was younger, but later I learned labor songs like Jim Garland's 'I Don't Want Your Millions, Mister,' and a parody of 'Little Brown Jug.' I went around the state and sang in the grange halls for Wallace."

Pete Seeger was Derroll's first live influence on the banjo. At a party after a concert (where Seeger "wowed" Derroll with his music), Seeger borrowed Derroll's banjo to play. "There was a crowd of wonderful people there," Seeger said, "and I remember having to retune Derroll's banjo." Seeger told Derroll that Garland, the ex-miner from Kentucky and singer of labor songs, had a broom factory in Washington.

"I went up to see Jim a couple of days later," Derroll said. "We became good friends and sang around the area for Wallace together. He was a political hero for me because he'd been at the Coal Creek strike. I remember him telling about his sister, Aunt Molly Jackson, who 'sure was a marryin' woman,' he said. He didn't like my favorite singer, Cousin Emmy. He said: 'Just because she's got a bad voice, that doesn't mean she's any good.' One summer I was hurt in a logging accident and stayed with Jim until I got better. He gave me a job at his factory, which made brooms to be sold by the blind, and told everybody I was a disabled veteran."

Derroll had separated from his first wife, married again, became a father for the second and third time, and parted from her. He was jailed on a false charge of non-support but released on probation because of his illness in the service. He found that most of his friends, particularly his political comrades, had turned against him, with a "serves him right" cold-shoulder. So with his third wife he left Oregon for Mexico to study art at the university. When they arrived in San Diego they discovered she was pregnant and there they remained.

"We were on a health food kick then," said Derroll, "and decided to live on the beach, close to the soil so the baby could absorb the good rays from the earth. We found a strip of vacant sand just north of Del Mar and set up our tent. Pretty soon some of the race track crew settled there and we had a regular little village." Derroll first worked as a spray painter for Lockheed, after that as a dish washer, and later on a construction crew.

One night, after seeing "The Thing" at a local theater, they stopped at a spiritualist church on the way home, were told some startlingly accurate facts, and be-



Derroll Adams with Donovan

Photo courtesy of Rediffusion, London

came interested in the subject. "Just for fun, we decided to hold a seance on the beach to see if we could fool some people. I was the medium and tried to think like a medium would think. To my surprise and horror, I found out that most of the things I said were right. One man said to me: 'What kind of a monster are you?'" Derroll's occult powers continued for several years until he tried to prove himself to his skeptic mother-in-law and they vanished.

While living in a trailer camp at Carlsbad one Christmas during the Korean War, Derroll was hired by a taxi company to drive seven Marines back east for the holiday. "One night in Texas, going 120 miles an hour, the car's lights went out. But we survived the crash with only a few bruises," he said. "The end of the trip was in Tampa, Florida, where the hotel I stayed at turned out to be a whore house. On the way back, we were almost arrested in Alabama because it was illegal to ferry people across the country without a special licence. But I told the police I was driving wounded Marines and they let me go. I made five hundred dollars for that trip and it allowed us to move to Los Angeles."

Derroll, then a father for the fourth time, worked at a succession of jobs, finally as head truck driver for Max Factor. But he wasn't much of a testament for cosmetics, with his sandals, long hair and ear ring. His face looked remarkably like Van Heflin's. Derroll's partner on the truck was Sid Berman and one day Berman was surprised to hear him whistling "Pretty Polly." "He asked me if I knew anymore," Derroll said,

"and I told him, hell yah, and I play the banjo to boot!"

"Berman brought Derroll up to meet us," said singer Weston Gavin. "We were a group of teenagers and people in their middle 20s who were interested in folk music and had organized World Folk Artists, a booking agency and guild. Herbie Cohen helped run it with me and our entertainers included Frank Hamilton, Odetta, Jo Mapes and Guy Carawan. Derroll was different from the rest. He was older, a painter, and didn't seem to be involved in politics, like we were. He had a growling voice like Lunsford and played his banjo very simply, like an old man looking back over a spent existence with a mild eye. He was like a gentle man who's chatting with you and at the same time wondering how he'd pay his rent. And at that time Derroll was reading The Journal of Albion Moonlight by Kenneth Patchen while we were stuck on Grapes of Wrath."

Derroll moved his family to Topanga Canyon not far from Will Geer, who was "the Santa Claus of the LA folk scene," according to Gavin. He became a father for the fifth and sixth time. Lord and Lady Buckley, and Bess and Butch Hawes were a part of the Topanga Canyon group, and it was at Geer's house that Derroll first met Jack Elliott, borrowing Bess' banjo to play a duet on "Muleskinner Blues." Woody Guthrie showed up for a short while and everyone helped him clear land in "Pretty Polly" canyon to build a cabin that was never finished. There Derroll also met James Dean and Cisco Houston.

Those were productive years for Derroll. He sang at concerts with the

WFA; painted pornographic miniatures; studied Zen and Yoga; composed stories for children about "Pony Bill Derroll," a Bunyanesque character with huge six-shooters he could never draw out of their holsters; and recorded his banjo for the Elmer Bernstein soundtrack of "Durango," a western film starring the late Jeff Chandler. It was at this time that he wrote "Portland Town," his most famous song. "I got the idea when I was living on the beach. There was an old couple whose only son had been killed in Korea and I sympathized with them because I had left three children in Oregon I would never see again. Finally the music came to me and I sang the song for Herbie Cohen and Frank Hamilton." Jack Elliott and Derroll had become good friends, singing together and taking trips up and down the west coast together. But Jack met June, married (Derroll was best man and sang "Rich and Rambling Boys" at the wedding), and left for Europe. Derroll got a job as a preacher. "I met someone who owned several faith-healing churches. There was supposed to be a master church but it didn't exist. I was hired as 'Dr. Adams' from the master church, and I spoke on Sundays, usually for five minutes at ten dollars a minute. But I always spoke the truth. I never talked about God. I think I helped the people and they always used to come up afterwards and shake my hand."

One afternoon, Derroll went to see "An American in Paris" and, "I knew I would see Paris soon," he said. Several days later, he received a letter from June Elliott asking him to join her and Jack in England, all expenses paid. Derroll, who was separated from his wife and

children, arrived in New York just before the ship left.

"I was on the same ship with Big Bill Broonzy, but he was in first class and I never saw him," Derroll said, "I met up with a Gaelic-speaking sailor from the Outer Hebrides and a cockney chap from London and we terrorized the ship. I had holes in my pants and no underwear. The

people thought I was a movie star because nobody else could look that odd. I sang hillbilly songs with a girl from Texas who played the guitar and one man seriously said he was surprised that I didn't recite Shakespeare."

1966 Shortly after he arrived, Derroll and Jack were booked for a long engagement at the posh Blue Angel night club in

London. They lived in a broken-down tenement called the "Yellow Door" with Lionel Bart, who later wrote "Oliver," and Scots singer Alex Campbell, who became Derroll's protege on the banjo. They recorded for Topic in London, and Jack, June and Derroll toured Europe, street singing, and spent the summer in Portofino. After recording in Milan, they separated, Derroll ended up on his knees

Rich and Rambling Boy

Transcribed from the singing of Jack Elliot and Derroll Adams, The Rambling Boys, Topic 10T14 by Ethel Raim.

The musical score is written in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It consists of four systems, each with a Melody line (treble clef) and a Tenor line (bass clef). Chords are indicated by letters A, D, and E7 above the staff. The lyrics are written below the notes.

System 1: Chord A. Melody: Well, I'm a rich, but a ramb-ling boy. Tenor: Well, I'm a rich, but a ramb-ling boy.

System 2: Chords D, A. Melody: There's man-y a cit-y I did en-joy. Tenor: There's man-y a cit-y I did en-joy.

System 3: Chords D, A. Melody: And now I mar-ried me a pret-ty lit-tle wife. Tenor: And now I mar-ried me a pret-ty lit-tle wife.

System 4: Chords E7, A. Melody: And I love her dear-er than I love my life. Tenor: And I love her dear-er than I love my life.

My mother said she's all alone
 My sister said she has no home
 My wife she wept in sad despair
 With an aching heart and a baby fair

When I die, don't bury me at all
 Just place me away in alcohol
 My forty-four put by my feet
 Tell everyone I'm just asleep

Repeat first verse

in a Catholic church in Pompeii, "my banjo broke, sick and hungry." Somehow he got to Rome where a prostitute bought him food and got him a hotel room. A magazine wrote a story about the "cowboy" and he appeared on television. Back in Paris, he met and married the daughter of an aristocrat who was also a baron and mayor of his village. Derroll and his new wife, Isabelle, were forced to leave France by her family and went to Brussels. Because Isabelle had decorated windows for Dior, they set up a decorating business for high couturier fashion shops and within a few years were considered to be one of the best in all Europe in their field.

Their business thriving, Derroll gave up playing the banjo professionally, except at the World's Fair briefly when Jack came to town. "I'd gotten fed up with playing in clubs to drunk audiences. I was tired of bumming and scrounging around on the road. The banjo hadn't given me any peace. It was always the banjo, never Derroll. Several times in the past I'd smashed my banjo for that reason. When I was a kid I wanted to be in show business, but after the war I was too afraid of people, of failure. In Los Angeles, I used to throw up before a performance because I was so scared. But whenever I'm scared of something, I have to keep trying. When we were successful in Brussels, though, I didn't need to try any more." For six years, Derroll was a "back porch musician," only playing the banjo at home or occasionally at the Cafe Welkom on a tiny street in the old quarter of the city. "After all, all of us do our best picking at home." Once he consented to play on television, in a review of the events of the past year. He became a father for the seventh and eighth time. "I love Brussels," he said, "and really think of myself as a Belgian."


But his business failed and his marriage broke up. Derroll bought a new banjo last year and came to London where he was welcomed as a prodigal son. During the years in Brussels, many folk singers had passed through to meet Derroll. One couple, Colin Wilke and Shirley Hart, carried Derroll's stories and "Portland Town" throughout England and Europe, creating a legend for him. Derroll toured the British clubs and played in concerts, and he recorded a record for a London company. But the LP has never been released. Executives at the company refused to believe that Derroll, with his cowboy hat, hip talk, beard and ear ring, was for real. "He must be phoney," they reasoned.

There is no end to this story. After the long retirement, Derroll is playing his banjo again in top form. Although he would prefer to live on the farm he and Isabelle bought in the south of France,

"sitting and thinking," he realizes at the age of forty that playing the banjo is the only way he can make a living. "And I know now that I do have something to say. It boils down to just 'love one another,' and I think people are listening." Last year he met Donovan, the British heir to Dylan's throne, and the two struck up a close friendship. Frequently seen in the neighborhood of Denmark Steet, London's Tin Pan Alley, in his boots and cowboy hat, Derroll knows all the pop entertainers and they think highly of him. "People who argue about the purity of folk music sicken me," he said. "I don't believe you should sing a five-hundred-year-old song the way it was first sung. I've always liked all kinds of music; country, even world war one songs, and pop music. Most of the folk kiddies today have pop records at home. I believe it's inevitable that pop and folk music will come together."

Pete Seeger believes "Derroll is the modern urban equivalent of the old-fashioned mountain man who lived off in his cabin the way he wanted to, making the kind of music he liked and saying, the heck with the rest of the world. There's a kind of stubborn honesty here which people admire and it's no wonder that Derroll Adams has become something of a legend while he's still a young man."

Not all people admire Derroll's stubborn honesty. Several clubs in the north of England have banned him because he swore on stage at a performance. And the legend illuminates only the glamorous features of Derroll's life, ignoring the unpleasant products of hard living, his tragic marriages, fatherless children, and his long fight with alcoholism. "One of these days I think I'll write a song about drinking," he said. "People put alcoholics down and they shouldn't because it will only make them worse. I think alcoholics should be helped not to worry about their problem. They should only be encouraged to keep on fighting."

Derroll's musical career seems long, hard and complicated. But to Derroll, only one thing need be said. "I've always loved the banjo, loved the sound of it, loved to play it. And when I play, whether to myself or before an audience, I always play with my heart,  soul and body."

