

**2025 re-print and expanded edition**

# AMERICAN MUSIC

The Blasters Newsletter

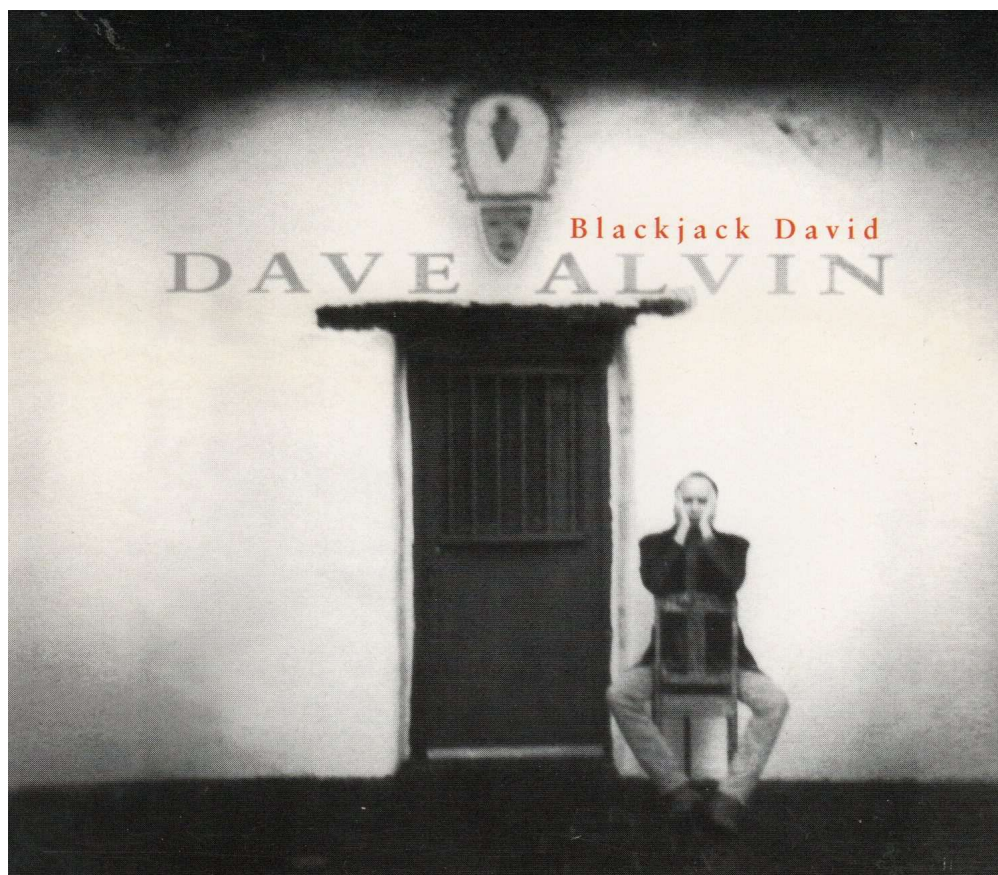
Issue #19 June '98

## DAVE ALVIN TOUR DATES

### With the Guilty Men

6/12 Chattanooga TN at Riverbend Fest.  
6/13 Newport KY at Southgate House  
6/15 Cleveland OH at Wilberts  
6/16 Lexington KY at Lynagh's  
6/18 Richmond VA at Museum of Arts  
6/19 Charlotte NC at Double Door  
6/20 Atlanta GA at Star Bar  
6/21 Birmingham AL at City Stages  
6/22 Asheville NC at TBA  
6/24 Northampton MA at Iron Horse  
6/25 Boston MA at House of Blues  
6/26 N.Y.C. at Mercury Lounge  
6/27 Philadelphia Pa at North Star Bar  
6/30 Annapolis Md at Rams Head  
7/1 Columbus OH at Musk Hall (Dave will play solo)  
7/2 Milwaukee WI at Summerfest  
7/4 Berwyn IL at FitzGerald's  
7/7 Minneapolis MN at 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue  
7/8 Iowa City IO at Gabes  
7/9 Columbia MO at Mojo Room  
7/10 St Louis MO at Union Station  
7/11 Lincoln NE at Zoo Bar  
7/17-19 Vancouver BC at Folk Fest  
7/24 Dallas TX at Gypsy Tea Room  
7/25 Houston TX at Satellite club  
7/26 Austin TX at Continental  
7/29 Albuquerque NM at Dingo Bar  
7/30 Phoenix AZ at Rhythm Room  
7/31 Tucson AZ at Rialto theatre  
8/1 San Diego CA at Casbah  
8/6 Portland OR at Blue Lake Concerts  
8/7 Seattle WA at The Pier  
8/14-15 Central City CO at Miners Fest  
8/15 (nite) Denver CO at The Blue Bird  
8/19 Long Beach CA at Museum of Art  
8/20 Davis Ca at Palms  
8/21 San Francisco at Slims  
8/22-23 Los Angeles Ca at Jacks  
**BLASTERS TOUR DATES**  
7/4 Hootenany Fest at Irvine CA

## Dave Alvin's 'Black Jack David' Album due out June 16



### **LATEST NEWS:** : -- Dave Alvin's first studio album in 4 years will hit stores

June 16. Go out, buy it, and follow Dave in this issue as he takes you song by song through the new album — No news to report on progress towards a new Blasters album. Phil Alvin has been laying low working with his new computer and CD Burner for a few months. He is taking steps towards the day when he can record a jam session in his living room and sell it by down load over the internet the next day. As for his hiatus from the Blasters, he explains, "Maintaining control sometimes means doing absolutely nothing. In the words of Sleepy John Estes 'I needed to do like Buddy Brown. You get up in the morning, eat your breakfast, then you lay back down.' I am getting ready to give each Blaster an individual CD of our rehearsals." — Dave has recorded a track called THESE TIMES WE'RE LIVIN IN for a tribute album to folk singer Kate Wolf. Dave plays with Rick Shea on the track. The album on Red House records should be out by early June. — (((Latest news on page 2))))

***Inside: Dave combs over BLACK JACK DAVID, The Monsters of Folk tour report, and more Q & A'S from the band.***

((Latest news from page 1)))) Dave Alvin's summer tour will include new member Rick Shea on pedal steel and mandolin. The Guilty Men will tour the US then go to Italy from September 9-21. Dave tentatively plans on doing another swing around the US in the fall playing folk clubs with one or two accompanying players, possibly a steel player and a fiddle player. — Dave's second book of poetry called THE CRAZY ONES is half-finished and has been indefinitely delayed as Dave explains, "I won't just throw it out there. I go through periods where I don't write poetry and I don't like poetry and then I'll have another mood where it all makes sense to me." — John Bazz has been filling in on bass in The Fabulous Thunderbirds. So far, dates haven't conflicted with the Blasters. John will be playing with the T-Birds on a Blues Cruise out of Athens, Greece, June 5-12. But before that, he will be playing the Cannes Film Fest and will tour Europe for three weeks with Bruce Willis and the Accelerators. — Dave Alvin didn't win the Grammy mentioned in the last issue, but were proud he was nominated in the 'Best Liner Notes' category for his writing contribution to the Ray Charles GENIUS & SOUL box set booklet. The award went to the ANTHOLOGY OF AMERICAN FOLK MUSIC, Look back to American Music issue #18 for a reprint of Dave's essay. -- James Intveld recently did a US tour opening for Kim Richey. Next issue #20 will feature an interview with James covering his latest activities. I'm happy to report that James is really focusing on his music. He has written songs for a second album and will record them in late summer for release in January. — Dave Alvin will produce Katy Moffatt in November or December for HighTone records. — The RED MEAT record Dave produced will come out in July or August. It will be on their own label called Ranchero. Dave, "It's a real good record. It's kind of the Derailers with a little bit of Big Sandy and Country Dick Montana thrown in." — May 31, Dave played on Southern California's Folkscene Radio show. — Dave will have an interview in an upcoming issue of No Depression. — Dave interviewed Buck Owens for Mix Magazine due out in the fall. Dave, "He's a great guy. He just took off his gloves in regard to Nashville (laughs), and laid it into them!" — Keith Wyatt is keeping busy. In June he will tape a "Blues Guitar Tone" video for Warner Brothers. His solo band "The Crying Knobs" will contribute a track on a compilation CD of Musicians Institute instructors coming out this summer. Keith will have an article coming up in Guitar World magazine called "How to Play Blues Rock" — Collectors alert: As reported in last issue, HighTone records put out a promotional sampler for the 'Monsters of Folk' tour. It included three newly recorded Dave Alvin songs. It is an instant collectible and fans have been desperately searching for copies. HighTone has now released a CD single to promote ABILENE for radio play. The single includes two of the Dave Alvin Monsters of Folk sampler songs. Neither of these CDs are intended for sale so they can only be found through collectors sources. — A U.K. magazine called UNCUT has given a way a free compilation CD of Demon recording artists in their April '98 issue. The CD includes Dave Alvin's BORDER RADIO. The version is from his first solo album. — An east coast based label called Run Wild Records will be releasing a tribute album to the Blasters and Dave Alvin that will include 18 different bands like the Blacktop Rockets, Sloe Gin Joes, Billy Hancock, Libbi Bosworth, Lucky 7, Josie Kreuzer, and more. — Some late breaking bad news: Lester Butler of the Red Devils and HighTone records blues band "13," died of a drug overdose in May. Lester was 38 years old. —Am

## **Blasters Merchandise. Available directly from the Blasters**

**Blasters Official Bootleg tape**-This 13 song live tape was professionally recorded on 7/24/97 at the Musicians Institute in Los Angeles CA. The Blasters have pressed a limited run of cassettes of this performance. The 50 minute tape is \$10. **Blasters Tour T-shirts are sold out.**

**Ordering info:** \$3 postage for any size order. Postage outside of the U.S. add an additional \$2. Make checks or money orders payable to "Jerry Angel" Payment must be in U.S. funds and drawn on a U.S. bank. Send to **PO BOX 7582, Santa Monica, CA 90406-7582** Do not send subscription or back issue orders to this address. See below.

**CONTEST #3 Answers to last issue's question-** QUESTION: Name 8 songs from the Blasters new American Music CD/2 LP vinyl HighTone album, that were later re-recorded by the Blasters or Dave Alvin for another release. List the 8 songs and their respective albums. ANSWER: American Music, Marie Marie, and Never No More Blues on The Blasters first Slash album. I Don't Want To on 1982's Live at The Venue EP, Barefoot Rock on 1983's Non-Fiction, Cry For Me on 1991's The Blaster Collection CD, Flattop Joint on Sony Burgess and Dave Alvin's album Tennessee Border, and Barn Burning on Dave Alvin's King Of California album. Brian Young, Leon Frijns and Per-Ake Persson are winners of an American Music album promo flat autographed by the current Blasters.

# BLACK JACK DAVID ALVIN

*Dave Alvin's new album called Black Jack David is truly a work of art. He gave master producer Greg Leisz a free hand to translate Dave's vision to disc. This is Dave's first studio album in four years and has been well thought out. Greg Leisz has become very much a part of Dave Alvin's recorded sound. They have been working together now for 11 years. To get the right feel, most of the album was cut live with overdubs added later. These added colorings are what makes the album sound so unique as Dave recalls, "When it came to the keyboards, Greg wanted to have guys that weren't virtuosos like Rick Solem. Greg wanted to have guys that wouldn't be virtuoso-ing and just be playing weird stuff. At first I didn't agree with him but then when these guys started to play, I said, "Oh Yeah!" So now let's let Dave tell it like it is – song by song.*

By Billy Davis

**BLACK JACK DAVID -**  
THE WRITING - I was sitting at home playing with suspended chords and I started singing it. Lyrically, it's a combination of the Warren Smith Sun record and a version from a white country blues player named Cliff Carlisle in the twenties or early thirties. A lot of the folk people know a version by Woody Guthrie called GYPSY DAVEY. The song goes back to the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> century. What I liked about the story is there is a beginning and middle but no real ending to the story. It's all left kind of ambiguous. Warren Smith claimed he wrote it, but he based it on a version by T.

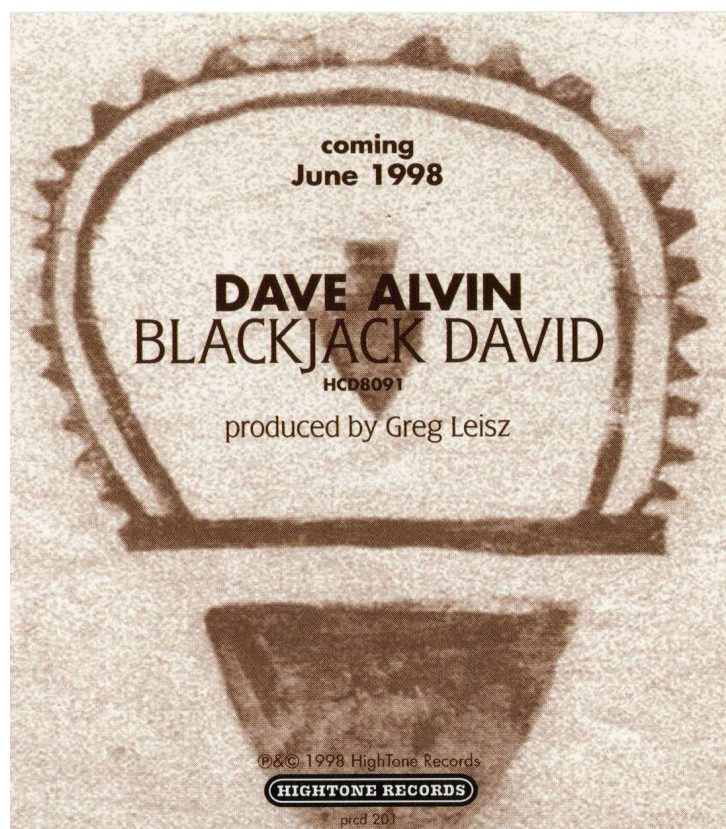


Texas Tyler, who was a honky tonk singer in the 40's. The kind of arrangement I came up with is probably the darkest that it has been interpreted. The Warren Smith is pretty jaunty and Cliff Carlisle did it kind of hokum blues, but mine is pretty dark.

When I went out with Kelly Joe Phelps on tour, playing it was a confidence builder. Kelly Joe was a guest on the Folkscene Radio show, and he asked me to come down so we did a few songs and that was one of them. The show was taped. A couple of weeks later I was driving around and the Larmans (Folkscene DJ's) played the version of that song. I said, "Hey, that sounds really good!" Then I thought maybe I should cut this. Then later it came together to fit in with the other songs. In the very early days of the Blasters, we did the Warren Smith version note for note.



THE RECORDING - That beginning drone sound is a standup bass played by David Pilch. He uses a bow to give it that earthy sound. There are two standup basses on here. One where he played the chord changes and then he overdubbed the didgeridoo thing, that's what he called it (the drone sound). We cut a lot of the stuff on this record live. It would be me, Bobby and the bass player. Greg (Leisz) would either keep time with a mandolin or guitar. Then he would go back and re-dub his parts. On this track, Bobby and I cut the vocals, drums, and guitar live. Then right after, David the bass player played the changes on acoustic bass. The next day he had taken the tape home and played it over and over. He came in with this whole didgeridoo effect where he is bowing the low strings very quickly and it sounds like an aborigine instrument. Greg overdubbed some banjo and the Weisenborn slide guitar. It's a particular lap slide guitar that was only made in the teens and twenties. It's made out of this type of wood that gives it a sound unlike any slide guitar. With certain tunings, you can get that deep low rumbling that you couldn't get with a dobro or a nation steel guitar. But it can sound huge and orchestral. We had Dillon O'Brein come in and he used an old celtic medieval instrument called the harmonium. It's a keyboard instrument that is like an early version of an accordion. We ran it through a Leslie (spinning speaker amplifier) so at times it sounded like a Hammond organ.



**ABILENE** - THE WRITING - It's based on a true story, and she's doing much better now. Abilene was the first song recorded and took about three days to get it right.

THE RECORDING - It was pretty rough. We went through a lot of versions of it. What I didn't realize was that the version we were doing live was clocking in at about 7 minutes. We cut it down to 5 minutes, then rearranged it even more. Bob Glaub played bass and Greg (Leisz) played baritone guitar. It's not quite a 6-string bass and not quite a guitar. It has deeper strings. It was the first song we started with and it was the hardest.

**NEW HIGHWAY** - THE WRITING - It's somewhere between a Lightnin' Hopkins and a Robert Wilkins guitar part. Ever since I have been touring with Kelly Joe or Chris Smither, I've been trying to improve

my thumb coordination. I was screwing around with that groove. Every now and then when I have a couple of beers, NEW HIGHWAY is kind of the way I look at the world. (laughs) So I just wrote some lyrics that I had lying around. It came easy. When I cut the songs in December for the Monsters of Folk promo CD, two of the songs were legitimate old songs – HOW YOU WANT IT DONE and RAILROAD BILL. I wanted something that was a little more up

tempo and bluesy. It came out so good that I thought it could work on the new record, So I sat down and made the lyrics more coherent and more of a blues storytelling going on.

THE RECORDING - The new one has bass and drums and mandolin, actually mandolla - which is a bigger mandolin. We did about 4 or 5 takes and just played it.

**CALIFORNIA SNOW** - THE WRITING - There were 2 stories in the back of the L.A. Times a few winters ago. With out getting into politics, there was this "Operation Gatekeeper" where they shut down the Tijuana/San Diego border crossing, and they made it incredibly difficult to cross there illegally. So people went east 50 miles to the mountains. They would come up out of Mexico where it's desert and they crossed the border into the mountains. We had a cold winter that year and the people would come up wearing tennis shoes and t-shirts. The next thing you know they would be in the middle of a snow storm. 35 to 50 people died and this story was buried in the back of the paper! I was really moved, but I didn't want to write a song that was pro or anti-immigration. I just wanted to write about the point of view of an American working guy. It's such a complicated issue. To take a black and white stand on it is wrong. So the guy's life is in transition where he's divorced trying to take care of himself; then there's other people who are doing the same thing. I wrote it and then I called Tom (Russell) and he polished it up for me. I thought it was too Springsteen-esque, but I said 'fuck it.' It's not about New Jersey. Hey this is my territory! (laughs)

THE RECORDING - That was another tough one - getting the vocal right and the groove. Greg didn't want it to sound like a country song, but more like a folk song. I had been doing it with the band kind of country-ish at the unannounced Jack's (Sugar Shack in L.A.) gigs. I was used to singing it in a different way. That was one we cut live but redid the vocal until it was perfect. It has the harmonium and the baritone guitar on it.

**EVENING BLUES** - THE WRITING - For the people who came to Jack's for those unannounced shows, they heard the song 5 different ways. The lyrics were from a poem of mine in the book (Any Rough Times Are Now Behind You). I always thought there is probably a song in there. It's between blues and folk. I used a weird tuning where the capo is way up the neck and the E string is tuned down to a G. The string flopped around making a lot of noise so I shyed away from doing it. So each time we tried a different version. Finally, I said, That's it." Usually when you write a song, your first inclination is the direction you should take it in. So I went back to that. It's an awkward tuning and I've figured out how I can do it on tour.

THE RECORDING - David Filch plays stand-up bass and Greg on the Weisenborn. And there is the harmonium, too.

**HATE THE WAY YOU SAY GOODBYE** - THE WRITING - I had a girlfriend whose voice just drove me up a wall. That is where the first line came from. When I first wrote it, I had it in a minor blues and then when I took it in to rehearsal we did it in the funkier, swampy blues thing and it really works. I wanted it to be between Little Willie John and Slim Harpo.

**MARY BROWN** - THE WRITING - To me it's a real positive love song (laughs) cause it's about a guy that will do anything for the women he loves. It's kind of a mountain murder ballad updated. When we were doing the Jack's shows we were doing it with the full band, and it was as if Marty Robbins would do it. I made a tape of the song for Greg, and he liked it better with just the guitar, so we cut it like that. But for the record it works best with me and the guitar.

THE RECORDING - Getting the vocal right was the important part. We approached it like a story song but it had to be stark and more emotional. Greg is doing weird pedal steel on there

with a volume pedal for effects.

**LAUREL LYNN** - THE WRITING - I knew a girl by that name and always liked the name. It's kind of swampy. We had been doing that in various ways with many verses and it was in the studio where I decided what to use. I wanted a song that was very loose and the lines don't particularly make sense.

THE RECORDING - That was done entirely live. Gregory (Boaz) played standup bass. We did 6 or 7 takes because we we're having so much fun. We spent all day working on this other song that didn't make it on the record. We were having big troubles with it so our treat at 11:00 PM was that everybody showed up, and we just blew out this song. Dillon (O'Brien) is a really great player and gave it that swampy sound. He did the bulk of the keyboard work. Gaffney had been bugging me for a long time that he hadn't been on any of my records, so I said, "Chris, come on down." Brantley Kearns played fiddle and was on Dwight Yoakam's first 3 or 4 albums. He did the last couple of Jack's shows with us. He's also on the last few Billy Joe Shaver records.

**1968** - THE WRITING - 4 or 5 years ago Chris (Gaffney) was doing an album called Mi Vida Loca. He was looking for a few more songs. So we sat down and wrote the first verse and chorus. We were working on SIX NIGHTS A WEEK and I said, "I don't have time, you just finish the song." He finished it and cut it as a rock 'n roll song. I always liked the first chorus and verse, but the rest I didn't like, so I re-wrote it. I changed the music entirely making it like a Carter family song. I haven't done it live and I didn't do it on the Monsters tour because Tom has a song called VETERAN'S DAY, which is the one of the best Vietnam songs. I was intimidated that he would pull it out and put me in my place. I might pull it out since he isn't gonna be on this tour (laughs).

THE RECORDING - It was the last song we recorded. Bobby (Lloyd) came up with the idea of doing it as a Tennessee Three song, a real boom-chicka-boom thing. We cut it that way and it sounded really good but it was a little long, and something was not right. One day over at Paul's studio, Greg wasn't there, and I picked up the guitar; Bobby was playing brushes on the back of an old ukulele, so we just cut it that way. Then Brantley overdubbed the fiddle, and that was it. The other version was too ponderous. Greg overdubbed a little dobro and a little mandolin. We did the harmony and the lead vocal at the same time

**FROM A KITCHEN TABLE** - THE WRITING - That is one of those Dave Alvin weird ones. It's about 2 guys growing up. Most people feel that if they would have done things different at some point in their life, things would be better. I knew this guy growing up who was a musician. He was a few years younger than me and I hadn't heard about him in years. So I just heard that his Dad had passed away and he was living at home with his Mom; I thought it was so sad. Sometimes I hear about ex-girlfriends or someone I loved at one time, and I hear about what they're doing and I get this sad feeling, thinking, well, maybe I blew it and we should have gotten married. Or, if maybe I hadn't played music for a living, we could have gotten married and had kids. So I took these feelings and put them into the mind of this old friend of mine. It's the exact opposite of the BLACK JACK DAVID song: polar opposites. The first few songs of the album are about people leaving and going away and the last few are about the people left behind. Usually, Sunday nights I get to thinking about missed opportunities and people I haven't seen in years.

THE RECORDING - I figured Greg would put some beautiful steel thing on there but he came

up with the idea of the clarinet; that it's a real lonely sounding instrument played a certain way. Greg played on a Victoria Williams record and got to know Doug Weiselman. He did saxophones and clarinets. I never thought I'd say, "Hey good clarinet solo! (laughs) "So that was a first. It kind of hit."

**TALL TREES - THE WRITING** - That was a song Fontaine Brown and I wrote. We wrote three songs together on MUSEUM OF HEART and we wrote MR. LEE. He's a pal of mine and a good guy to co-write songs with because he's so persistent. I tend to wander off while I'm writing. I'll get interested in a bird flying by or something. (laughs) We came up with that first verse at the time we wrote MR. LEE. We had it in various blues shapes. I wanted another hard blues for this record and he came over and we were working on this country sort of thing and I got disinterested. We pulled out that verse and I started playing a real primal Mississippi blues one chord thing. The words just fit perfectly, and about 3 hours later we finished it. It was the ultimate polar opposite of the BLACK JACK DAVID song because the guy is waiting for his woman to come back to him. Besides it being so moody, it was a great way to end the record.

**THE RECORDING** - That was a lot of fun to record. We played it a lot, like 6 hours because it was so fun to play. We had a version of it on DAT and in the middle it goes ape shit weird. It gets real aggressive playing a solo thing with Bobby pounding on the drums. We thought that was the take. Then I figured, "Let's do one take where it's just droning along." It seemed to work better. When you listen close, you're waiting for a solo and to break out of that mood. So when it doesn't break, it seems more effective.

**UNRELEASED SONGS** - I had a few other folky ballads and Greg thought the record would be too long. One was called ANGEL ON YOUR SHOULDER that we were doing at some of the Jack's unannounced shows. It was really along the lines of EVERY NIGHT ABOUT THIS TIME. Greg didn't want to have anything that was overtly country on the record, so we rearranged it to be R & B/folk and we cut it with a scratch vocal. The other song was called RIO GRANDE that me and Tom wrote. I think there is version of RIO GRANDE with me and the guitar that we cut. It was 5 minutes long and it has a lot of words. That's without adding a guitar solo. For a while it was going to be the end of record song, but then we said we only have so much time. Now I'm 2 songs down for my next record (laughs).

**THE STUDIO** - We used a studio called Media Vortex, which is actually the studio where we cut the stuff for Tulare Dust. It now has a different owner named Dave Ahlert. In a weird bit of synchronicity, he was the second engineer on the Blasters' first Slash album. Greg went down there booking the studio time and talked to Dave Ahlert telling him he was doing a Dave Alvin record, and he said, "Your kidding me! I worked on the Blasters first Slash record!" When Greg told me that. I said, "That's where we're making the record! That's too perfect!" Dave was a great guy. When we got down there, we started swapping stories about the Blasters recording sessions. He brought back a lot of memories: We used to have cases and cases of beer just stacked up in the studio. (laughs) We were all emotionally involved in this thing, so our memory is not exactly right and Dave had to be straight and sober through all this lunacy going on. He remembered a couple of arguments like whether or not to fade out I LOVE YOU SO or do it like we did it live. This was known as the "flying baffle argument" between Phil and Bill. They have these baffles that separate amplifiers and drums. These things were 40 or 50 pounds on wheels. At some point Phil punched this baffle and sent it flying across the room. That



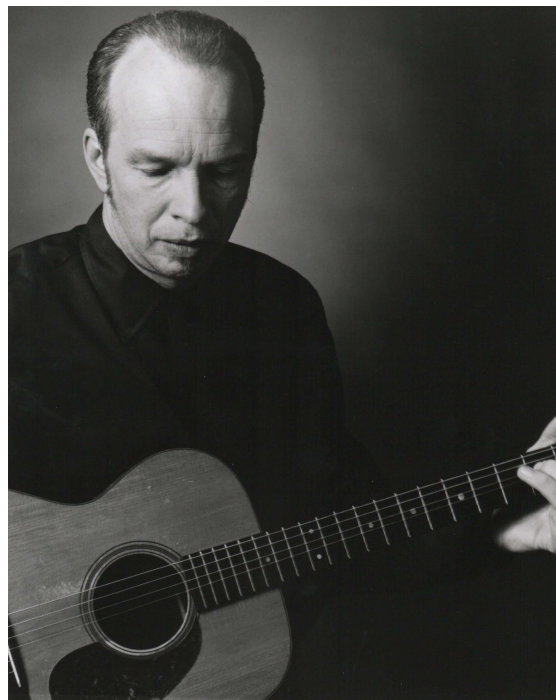
ended the argument right there. (laughs) So having Dave around on these sessions felt great. It felt like coming around full circle. The record is mastered by Joe Gastwirt, who is the best mastering guy in Los Angeles and maybe America. He does all the recent Dylan records and the Dead records. Who ever has millions of dollars, they go to him. We did the record for \$30,000, but one of the things I'm proudest of is it sounds like its \$150,000 record. It doesn't sound like it's an independent record cut at a low budget. That's because of Paul's engineering and Joe taking a liking to the record. They mastered it 3 times to get it just right. Usually these things take one time but he was so into the record, that he just wanted to get it better and better.

STUDIO MUSICIANS THAT WE DON'T KNOW - The

weird thing about these type of sessions is some guys come in, you don't know them and you never see them again. *David Piltch* -- Greg knows him from his k.d. lang sessions. *Bob Glaub* -- He played on King Of California. He's played with Taj Mahall and Jackson Brown and now plays with John Fogerty. *Dave Jackson* -- He is on Peter Case's new album. He's an older guy that has played on a lot of records. *Dillon O'Brien* -- He is a singer songwriter on RCA Records. I didn't know he plays keyboards. He approaches keyboards differently, he plays it more as a folk instrument. *Brantley Kearns* -- He was with the David Bromberg band years ago and then he played with Dwight on his first few albums, and recently with Billy Joe Shaver. He has even done some acting. *Dan McGough* -- He specializes in weird keyboards. He did a couple of things on TALL TREES, but we only used the organ part; it's a Miles Davis type part. He played a great part on HATE THE WAY YOU SAY GOODBYE -- a pretty wild swampy organ.

ALBUM ARTWORK - I was looking for something for the cover that would be mysterious and unknown, so people would say, "Who is this Black Jack David?" The pictures were taken at the Pala Indian reservation in Pala, California by Issa Sharp. She and I and Bobby (Lloyd) went there. It's two hours south of L.A. and an hour drive inland from San Diego. It was a satellite mission for a bigger mission called San Luis Rey and one of the only California missions that is still a functioning church for native Americans. When we were kids, my Dad took us fishing at Lake Henshaw, which is up in the mountains there. For years we drove by it. It's a beautiful place that has those frescos that we used for the artwork. You'll see it above the door; it's painted into the adobe. Who knows what it means. We just thought it looked cool. I know the heart with the cross is the sacred heart of Jesus, but the little designs and halo effect on that face, who knows what that's about?

DIGIPACK DESIGN - I wanted the album to look different just because it was the first studio record in 4 years. There is something about the digipack that kind of makes you remember what it was like to have an album. You kind of get that tactile sense of feeling cardboard again (laughs). —Am



Photos: Steve Smith



# MONSTERS OF FOLK U.S. TOUR

Photos: Billy Davis

By Billy Davis



## **New York City at the Bottom Line**

It all started when 67-year-old folk legend Ramblin' Jack Elliott signed with HighTone records to release a new album called FRIENDS OF MINE. Instead of sending Jack out on the road himself to promote his album, HighTone came up with the idea of assembling their top folk acts on a package tour similar to what they did with their Country and Rockabilly acts in 1996 on 'The Roadhouse Revival' tour. The Monsters of Folk artists are Ramblin' Jack Elliot, Dave Alvin, Tom Russell, and Chris Smither.

Ramblin' Jack is legendary for a long career in folk and his close friendship in the '50s traveling and living with Woody Guthrie. In the '60s and '70s, he hung around with Bob Dylan. So Jack has more than a few stories to tell. Dave Alvin was very impressed; "The first time I met Jack was on the Pleasure Barons' tour. Jack is a real rock 'n roller. You hand him a guitar and you never know what can happen. With a lot of folk acts, they play songs the same every night - not Jack. It was great to hear stories about Woody Guthrie. It was a kick! He reminds me of Lee Allen, the same type of guy."

For this tour, HighTone sent out a press release stating, "Utilizing acoustically-friendly clubs and showcase venues, the Monsters of Folk tour, will give folk, blues and country music fans an up-close and personal look at four artists performing together in a special "in-the-round" setting." This "in-the-round" setting made it so much more interesting seeing the four

interact with each other. They didn't always play at the same time, in fact sometimes the others would just sit back and listen to the stories and songs either mesmerized or sharing a laugh over a story told.

The quartet visited 12 cities playing 17 shows. Although the artists played our favorite songs each is known for, the highlight would be the group songs which would have to be worked out fresh by the four that had never played together before. The night before the first gig in Seattle the Monsters all got together for a 3-hour rehearsal at the Tractor Tavern club. It was decided that in the set the artist would take turns playing a song unaccompanied and after every round they would play a song together. Later different duets and accompaniments would develop. The group

Photos: Billy Davis



## THE MONSTERS

(Profiles from the HighTone press release)

**DAVE ALVIN** - Founding member of seminal L.A. roots-rock band The Blasters, Dave Alvin has carved out an impressive niche for himself as a solo performer and songwriter. His last two albums, **King of California** and **Interstate City** both hit the Top Five on the Gavin Americana Chart. Alvin's next album, entitled **Black Jack David** will be released in June.

**RAMBLIN JACK ELLIOTT** - He has been called a national treasure for his contributions to music and for his influences on such artists as Bob Dylan and Beck. His last album, 1995's **South Coast**, won a Grammy Award for Best Traditional Folk Album. **Friends of Mine**, Elliott's HighTone debut released March 17, teams him up with such renowned artists as Bob Weir, Tom Waits, Emmylou Harris, Nanci Griffith, Jerry Jeff Walker, John Prine, Guy Clark, and Arlo Guthrie.

**TOM RUSSELL** - Current albums, **The Long Way Around** and **Song of the West: the Cowboy Collection**, have made both the Top Five and the Top Ten Americana Charts. He continues to be a favorite at festivals around the world. 1995's **Tulare Dust (a Songwriters' Tribute to Merle Haggard)**, which Russell co-produced with Dave Alvin, featured such additional performers as Dwight Yoakam, Joe Ely, Lucinda Williams, Billy Joe Shaver, and Iris DeMent, and it earned honors as the Americana Album of the Year.

**CHRIS SMITHER** - Chris has been a mainstay at folk and blues festivals all over the world since the 1970's. Bonnie Raitt calls him "my Eric Clapton" and has recorded his song, "Love Me Like a Man," on several of her albums. Smither's 1996 **Small Revelations** CD became his biggest-selling album, hitting the Top Five on the Americana and Triple A Charts. In January, HighTone reissued his album **Another Way to Find You**, which was originally released in 1991 and had been out of print





songs were the important ones and the opening song; also a group song would be a track from Jack's new album called *HARD TRAVELIN*.' That and the last song before the encore; *DO RE MI*, were the first few songs that the quartet selected to play. Dave remembers, "We knew we had to play a few Woody Guthrie songs because Jack knew Woody and he learned everything right from him. He is probably the best interpreter of Woody Guthrie songs."

Dave said the set list changed from City to city, "We dropped a song called *HOW LONG BLUES* by Leroy Carr. It's a great song but we never quite jelled. We picked up these Carter Family songs called *EAST VIRGINIA BLUES* and *DIXIE DARLIN*." At about the second or third show, the group added another song called *RAILROAD BILL* They worked it up at a sound check. Dave had recently recorded the song for the *Monsters of Folk* promo CD. Jack had recorded it in the early 60's, so Dave bowed to Jack's arrangement of the song. Dave's recorded arrangement was definitely more aggressive and more melodic, but it was still interesting to hear a different take on the song. One of the highlights of the show was the quartet's *Train Medley*. It really started rockin' and was a great set closer. It was cool to watch the performers during the medley looking at each other for cues on how the song was going to turn next. You could tell that this song changed from night to night. It was very exciting as they based it all on *THE WABASH CANNON BALL* lead by Jack on vocals leading into Tom singing *WRECK OF THE OLD '97*. Dave moved next with *PROMISED LAND* with Chris returning a few verses of *WABASH*. Dave really stepped it up launching in to *ROCK ISLAND LINE* bringing the set to a roaring acoustic finish. Dave remembers, "That evolved by the time we got to the East Coast (end of the tour). The people on the West Coast didn't get to hear it with *ROCK ISLAND LINE* and *OLD '97*. The first few gigs we just did *WABASH* alone and around the middle of the tour the other songs started popping up in the there and it became a medley. A couple of times early on I started singing *ROCK ISLAND LINE* and people got really excited. I couldn't tell if it was because it was the Leadbelly song or the Knitters song. So I thought I should add that to the *JUBILEE TRAIN*

Photos: Billy Davis

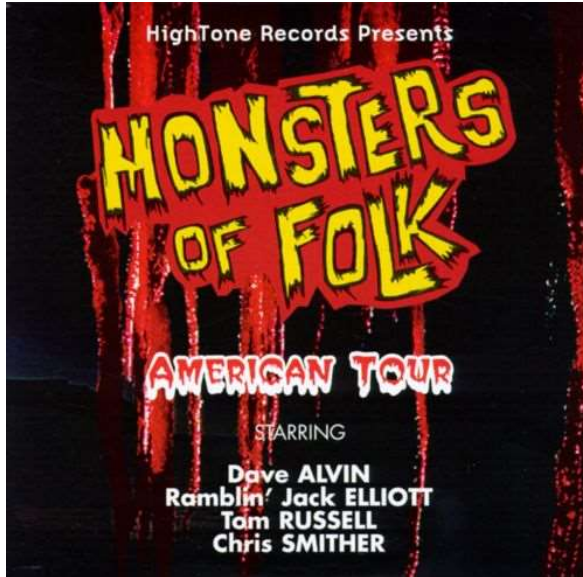


**New York City at the Bottom Line**



### MONSTERS OF FOLK PROMO CD

DAVE ALVIN: They were going to do a sampler CD for the tour, and they wanted songs from KING OF CALIFORNIA and I said, "Don't do that, let me do something different." Something to make it special. I'd still like to do a whole album worth of that stuff.



**RAILROAD BILL** - That's an old folk song. I would always sit around and play it but I could never put it on a record. I had a recording by Will Bennett that was done in the 20s, and that's where my version came from. I added a few more verses to give it a story line. Ramblin' Jack recorded it in the early 60s, but I had never heard his version.

**HOW YOU WANT IT DONE** - That was a song that Phil and I used to argue about. Big Bill Broonzy cut it in 1928. Phil would always say it was the first rockabilly song. I found a version that predates Big Bill's version by Louis Lasky, who was one of the guys who actually taught Big Bill to play guitar. I kept some of the lines from Big Bill's and some from Louis Lasky's like, "I can get religion and walk the sacred way." It was one of those songs that I've always wanted to play, but it's a bitch with the thumb pick. It's a real flat pick type of song. It's a bitch on your arms, too! I have a touch of tennis elbow from guitar playing-the carpal tunnel thing. Ever since Phil and I were kids, we had that record, and we thought it was the greatest thing on earth.

**NEW HIGHWAY** - I wanted to write a quick blues, and it came out so well I finished writing it and put it on the new record.

medley in my shows with the Guilty Men."

The solo songs were interesting too. Dave Alvin previewed songs throughout the tour from his upcoming album Black Jack David doing the title track, NEW HIGHWAY, MARY BROWN, ABILENE, and CALIFORNIA SNOW. Dave remembers this fantastic coincidence at the Seattle show, "I did California Snow and I was intro-ing the song, explaining what it was about. (See the explanation of CA. SNOW in Dave's BJD article in this issue) I hadn't even gotten to the point of the dead bodies and some guy yelled out "Yeah and they all died!" I thought he was being a smart-ass, but he came back stage after the show. He owned a ranch in Alpine California, which is in the mountains. He found one of the dead bodies when that happened. So, it was really weird because I was meeting the character from my song. He was real moved and blown away by the song and he was like, "Yeah that's my life story right there."

On the new songs, Dave really displays good guitar work. The guitar playing he does on all of the songs on the Monsters promo CD is outstanding. Especially the finger acrobatics he performs on HOW YOU WANT IT DONE. As a special treat, Dave did that song at McCabe's in Santa Monica and he played it without a hitch. Other songs played frequently were: I WON'T BE LEAVIN, DRY RIVER, BORDER RADIO, WANDA & DUANE, KING OF CALIFORNIA, and KERN RIVER.

Dave made a personal dedication of KERN RIVER at the Philadelphia show, "About every 4 months my brother Phil and I will exchange a sentence. The most recent sentence was in March. It was our Dad's birthday. My brother had done a very sweet thing - He had our old disintegrating home movies put on this disc and he showed them that day. There were these films that I hadn't remembered, of me, Phil, and our sister swimming on the Kern River. That's where we took our vacations when we were kids. So I want to do it for my brother."



Philadelphia at The Tin Angel

Tom Russell often played his famous songs including new ones like **THROWING HORSESHOES AT THE MOON** and on occasion like in Chicago played **VETERAN'S DAY**. Dave Alvin considers it one of the best Vietnam songs he has heard. The biggest roar from the crowd came when he played his signature song: **GALLO DEL CIELO**. Tom described his big break when he was driving a cab in New York City. One of his passengers was Robert Hunter who after hearing this song sung by Tom in the taxi helped Tom break into the New York club scene.

Throughout the tour some of the artists would add vocals or a subtle instrumental accompaniment to the others solo songs. Dave and Tom were a natural duet being friends and co-writers. One such support

player that wasn't subtle was on Tom Russell's **OUT IN CALIFORNIA**. Dave joined in and played lead guitar licks on acoustic guitar all through the song. - Making it a real rocker. Tom intro-ed it saying that it was about the last bar on earth, which he revealed is in Canutillo Texas, called the Lost Lizard club. Dave co-wrote the song and recorded it on his Interstate City album and claims the last bar is in Tromso Norway. Dave, "Tromso is about 300 miles north of the arctic circle and when you look out the front window of this particular bar, where there are no trees, you are looking straight at the North Pole. If that's not the last bar on earth, I don't know what is!"



There was some continuity going at the New York shows. Dave did all three of his California titled songs. Then in the second show Tom, Chris, and Dave traded off songs with "blues" in the title. Tom's **BEYOND THE BLUES**, Chris's **CAN'T SHAKE THESE BLUES**, and Dave's **EAST TEXAS BLUES**. That last song Dave recorded on his **KING OF CALIFORNIA** album and at this show, Dave's playing was exceptional sounding. Very hard edged country blues that got the crowd going with catcalls.





**Dave, Chris Jack, and Tom**



**Philadelphia at The Tin Angel**

Another Russell/Alvin song with Russell on the lead was BLUE WING. Dave recorded it for his KING OF CALIFORNIA album and has made it as much his own even though Tom Russell is the sole writer of it. On this tour, their rendition allows Dave to take a verse of lyrics and a second on guitar. One other they wrote together and performed early on in the tour was HALLEY'S COMET. The tour wasn't short on laughs. In Chicago the two played up a mock argument on how many songs they have written together. "Was it 5 or 6?" Tom said and Dave playfully opposed.

Jack hasn't wrote many of his own songs, but demonstrated that he likes to play Jimmie Rogers, The Carter Family, Bob Dylan and of course Woody Guthrie. He even throws in a Grateful Dead song. He had no trouble coming up with different songs to play on any given night. Jack proved to be an entertaining storyteller. One tale told was when he was locked in a mountain cabin in Pennsylvania in a snow storm and spent three days learning Dylan's DON'T THINK TWICE. He said it was the quickest he ever learned a song. Jack joked numerous times, about how tough it was for him to learn a song. In some cases, he claimed to spend a year learning one song. Another story was told about the time he appeared on Johnny Cash's ABC-TV Series Variety show in 1969. At his hotel a half - naked Kris Kristofferson knocked on his door looking for an opinion on a new song he wrote called ME AND BOBBIE MCGHEE. Both these songs were featured by Jack in the Monsters set.

Jacks participation in duets was limited to just vocal accompaniment. In Tom Russell's THE SKY ABOVE AND THE MUD BELOW Jack played the Mexican Horse thief. He provided dialog, not exactly in time, which brought lots of laughter from the crowd. In Philadelphia, some of Jack's crooked flavor rubbed off when Tom slipped on his lyrics singing "The Trial commenced and ended tuick.....(instead of "quick")" Tom stopped playing and looked at the audience prompting loud laughter. We were all so entranced listening to the story being told, when that word stuck. It broke the concentration. After a few seconds for the crowd to calm down, he picked it up to the finish. Dave quickly announced, "Tom. I've known you for almost 8 years now and I've never seen you blow a song. I have new respect for you." Tom replied, "Jack's got me shook." In turn, Tom turned in some vocal help on one of Jack's tunes called CUP OF COFFEE. Jack stated, "This was an early attempt by me to write a trucker's song. I wrote it in the back seat of Johnny Cash's car. I went down to Nashville and recorded it with



him and later it ended up on one of his albums.” Tom played the part of Johnny Cash, getting that baritone voice down pretty close. The song included lots of random dialog between Jack and Tom. You had to listen carefully each night because the ad-lib was different. It sounds like they had lots of fun with it.

Chris Smither was the only one of the four who wouldn’t fall right in to the folk category. He is strictly blues all the way. That touch added a little edge to what the others

were playing in the group songs. His slide guitar sound mimicked the steel guitar sound often heard on old folk/ country songs. He didn’t play much on the other artists solo songs, but later in the tour he joined Dave on NEW HIGHWAY. Since it was a blues song he fit in nicely adding lots of color. For his solo songs, he has six albums of material to draw on. He played LINK OF CHAIN, THE DEVILS REAL, CAVE MAN, HOLD ON and SMALL REVELATIONS from his 1997 HighTone album of the same name.

The tour got a certain level of notoriety in the folk world. Dave Alvin remembers being honored to meet luminaries such as Dave Van Ronk in San Francisco. He is a guy that taught Bob Dylan a lot of stuff in the early days. In Austin, Texas, Don Edwards who is one of the great cowboy singers came to the show, and in Boston the famous writer Peter Guralnick attended.

Ramblin’ Jack’s daughter is a film maker and has spent the last year making a documentary about Jack, so the cameras were running at every show. For Dave Alvin his favorite special moment of the tour involved Ramblin’ Jack: “My favorite memory was in St. Louis. The hotel was about 20 minutes away from the gig. Jack and I went back after sound check to take a nap. We rode back together just the two of us in a rent-a-car. As soon as we got in the car, I started talking about Billy The Kid and he sang me this wonderful ballad acapella about Billy The Kid. I got to know Jack real well and that was special.”

It was a wonderful tour because the quartet enjoyed playing together and it showed. They have talked about joining forces on at least on one track on Jack’s next record. There has even been some interest to take the tour to europe. Let’s hope that chemistry comes together again in the form of another Monster. --Am



**The Monsters of Folk with HighTone publicist Mark Pucci**



# Jack Elliott rambles in for monstrous folk weekend

By TOM WILK  
Courier-Post Staff

Folksinger Ramblin' Jack Elliott is about halfway through an interview talking about his new album, *Friends of Mine* (High-Tone), when he makes a candid admission about rambling.

"I lost my appetite for traveling; I don't like flying in airplanes or waiting in airports," says the man who dubbed himself "Ramblin' Jack" about 40 years ago.

At age 66, however, Elliott hasn't lost his appetite for making music. *Friends of Mine* is an album of easygoing charm and amiable camaraderie featuring Elliott and an all-star cast of 10 singers, including Bob Weir, Guy Clark, John Prine, Emmylou Harris and Nanci Griffith on songs ranging from the Grateful Dead's "Friend of the Devil" to Joe Ely's "Me and Billy the Kid."

And Elliott, who has played music for nearly half a century, hasn't given up on traveling or touring. He's appearing with fellow HighTone artists Dave Alvin, Tom Russell and Chris Smither as the Monsters of Folk for three shows this weekend at the Tin Angel in Philadelphia.

The foursome will perform individually and together. Alvin

will preview songs from his upcoming album, *Black-Jack David*, scheduled for release in June. Russell is likely to dip into his fine 1997 releases *The Long Way*

*Around*, a career retrospective, and *Songs of the West*, a collection of cowboy songs. Smither is touring behind the reissue of his 1991 album, *Another Way to Find You*.

Elliott says the origins of *Friends of Mine* began on a movie set where he worked with his producer Roy Rogers.

"We were playing hobos on a movie set who played guitars," Elliott recalls during a phone interview from his home in Northern California. "What started as a music scene ended as a jam session" as he and Rogers hit it off musically, says Elliott. "Roy



ELLIOTT

can play anything with six strings."

The album resembles a musical autobiography as it opens with Elliott and Arlo Guthrie harmonizing on "Ridin' Down the Canyon," a Gene Autry song. For Elliott, the music has come full circle as he traveled the West with Woody Guthrie, the father of Arlo, in the early 1950s.

Elliott was an early influence on Bob Dylan; he toured with Dylan as a member of the Rolling Thunder Revue in 1975 and included a pair of early Dylan songs on the new album ("Walls of Red Wing" and "He Was a Friend of Mine").

*Friends of Mine* also includes "Bleeker Street Blues," a tribute written for Dylan after his bout with a serious heart ailment and a rare Elliott original. "This is the only time in my life where I sat down with pencil and paper and wrote something right out," he says.

With *Friends of Mine* released, Elliott is now considering writing his autobiography. "I'm

thinking about it real hard," he says, "but I'm having a hard time trying to get it started."

## If you go

The Monsters of Folk will perform at 7:30 and 10:30 tonight and at 6:30 p.m. Sunday at the Tin Angel, 20 S. 2nd St., Phila. Tonight's first show is sold out. For ticket availability, call 215-928-0770.

## Q. from you & A. from the band

**For Dave Alvin:** I was wondering about your role in a film a couple of years ago where you played a gangster. Is it on video? - Mike Smith, St. Louis, MO

**Dave:** A Gangster? Well, I played a cop. It was a "post riots in L.A." movie called Floundering. We were the bodyguards for the chief of police, this kid tries to kill the chief of police, and we tell him he's doing it all wrong. We're wearing suits, so maybe we look like gangsters.

**For Phil Alvin:** I saw the Phil Alvin Quartet in 1993 at Slim's in San Francisco. I was wondering who was playing drums then? He wore a soft brimmed fishing hat and being a drummer myself, I felt sorry for him when during the first song, the nut that holds the crash cymbal came off and he had to play the whole set without a crash. – Ron Rosano, San Francisco, CA

**Phil:** That was Dave Carroll who grew up with us and taught Bill Bateman. He is a wild, wild man. He played on COUNTY FAIR on the County Fair record. He played on DADDY ROLLIN STONE on the Unsung Stories record. He replaced Bill Bateman when he had to make a decision of which band to play in. Dave eventually tried to hi-jack our band until I threw his ass out (laughs).

**For Dave Alvin:** Could you clarify why the Pleasure Barons album did not come out on XXX Records. I thought Mojo himself owned the label? - Iain Tucker, Wiltshire, England

**Dave:** Mojo didn't own the label, his manager did at the time of the first tour. I don't know why it didn't come out. Dick (Montana) really owned the tapes and put up the money to put it out. Dick had the control more than Mojo.

**For Phil Alvin:** Now that your brother has recorded a fine acoustic album, what is your opinion on recording one yourself or as the Alvin brothers both? – Christian Gago Fernandez, La Coruna, Spain.

**Phil:** I am going to make an acoustic record, but first I have to get out this Blasters' record out. I would do anything with my brother, but you'll have to ask

David that. We like to play together. I can still kick his ass. (laughs) In the last 4 years, I've found some exquisite sounds and tones. I have a 4-string baritone ukulele. It's an incredible instrument. I'm very interested in making an acoustic record, in fact in this HighTone agreement I made, the first thing was to put a Blasters record out, but I had to agree to put a Phil Alvin solo record out as well as two other projects which my intentions are to do White Boy James and Jerome Bowman.

**For Dave Alvin:** What tracks did you play acoustic guitar on the Derailers' Reverb Deluxe album? --B.J. Huchteman Omaha, Nebraska

**Dave:** I did the high string guitar. It's a guitar that is strung with high strings to make it sound like a harp. Very ringy. I'm on a lot of them strumming away happily.

**For Phil Alvin:** Why do you title HEAR ME CRYIN as THE BIG F CHORD. – John Sheridan, Babylon N.Y.

**Phil:** I named it because I sing the song in the key of F. We start the song with a sustained F chord. So I say to the band, "Give me a big F chord, make a big deal out of it and don't put no rhythm in it." I've been singing that since I was in Downey High and recently at the place in Downey called the Dixie Belle I sang that with James (Intveld). Back then we had a band named The Strangers. This is before we had what everybody knew as the Blasters with David. We had Dave Carroll on bass, Johnny Bazz on drums, Gary Masi on guitar, and me singing and playing harmonica - so we played that song at the Dixie Belle even back then. The version that I heard and loved was on a Vee Jay record by Harold Burrage from Chicago.

**For Dave Alvin:** Tell us about the significance of a picture of Phil Alvin's unsung stories album appearing on your first solo album? - Tom Wilk, Pitman, NJ

**Dave:** I thought it would be a good gag. A little plug for the brother. (laughs) —Am



# Dave Alvin brings his 'American music' to town

By TOM WILK  
Courier-Post Staff

## MUSIC

For the title track to his new album *Blackjack David* (High-tone), Dave Alvin goes back to his roots — way back, more than 500 years.

The British folk ballad, which deals with a young woman leaving her husband and child for the title character, captured Alvin's attention as a teen-ager when he bought a Sun Records recording by Warren Smith for 25 cents in a California thrift store.

"The song goes back to the 14th or 15th century," said Alvin, who appears in concert Saturday at the North Star Bar in Philadelphia. "Blackjack David" has got that thing that old folk songs have; a lot of it has been ground down to basics so it leaves a lot of room for ambiguity. Anybody can read anything to it; it can be a song of independence or infidelity."

Alvin delivers an ethereal, haunting version of the song as the album's leadoff track that sets the stage for the rest of the compact disc — 10 Alvin originals — with its themes of love, hope and despair.

Alvin's album is a highly appealing blend of blues, folk and country, with a pinch of rock to produce what he calls "American music," the title of one of his earliest songs.

Standout tracks include "Evening Blues," the story of a couple's deteriorating relationship, "From a Kitchen Table," a song about personal choices and roads not taken in life, and "1968," a tale of Johnnie and Joe, two friends who went to Vietnam and the impact Joe's death has had on his friend.

The song's chorus sums up the story: "Tonight in this bar-room/he's easing his pain/He's thinking of someone/But he won't say the name/Folks say he's a hero/But he'll tell you he

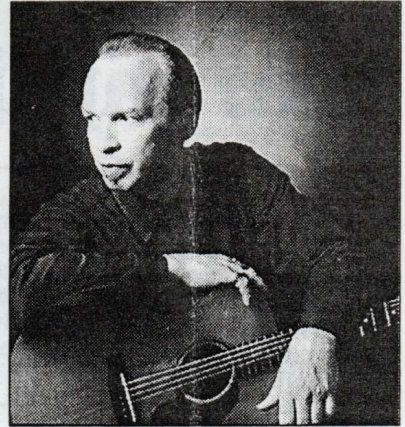
ain't/He left a hero in the jungle/Back in 1968."

Alvin's songs take shape in different ways. "Evening Blues" was originally a poem published in his 1995 book of poetry *Any Rough Times Are Now Behind You*. "Songs and poems are so different," Alvin said. "It takes time to let everything digest. You go back and look at a poem and say 'That would be a good song.'"

"1968" had a longer gestation period. Alvin had co-written the song with Chris Gaffney for Gaffney's 1992 album *Mi Vida Loca*. "It's loosely based on Chris' cousin. I liked the first verse and chorus, but I wanted to rewrite the rest. Chris did it as a rock 'n' roll song, but I gave it a Carter Family feel," Alvin said.

"From a Kitchen Table," was sparked by a meeting with an old acquaintance at a Pep Boys store in Alvin's hometown of Downey, Calif. "It's one of those songs that's totally uncommercial," he said with a chuckle. "It's about rehashing your life and wondering where people end up."

While Alvin, 42, made his reputation playing electric guitar



DAVE ALVIN

with the Blasters and briefly with X, *Blackjack David* is primarily an acoustic album similar to his 1994 release, *King of California*. Producer Greg Leisz plays a variety of stringed instruments, including slide guitar and mandolin to give the album its musical depth, and adds other instruments — harmonium, clarinet and banjo — not used on Alvin's previous releases.

On tour, Alvin has changed the lineup of his band, the Guilty Men. Joe Terry of the Skeletons has replaced Rick Solem on keyboards. Rick Shea has joined the band on pedal steel and lapsteel guitars. The rhythm section of Gregory Boaz (bass) and Bobby Lloyd Hicks (drums) is the same.

"I wanted to change the sound, to emphasize the guitars more and get some of the textures used on *King of California*," Alvin said. "Financially, I could afford the fifth guy."

Opening act Duane Jarvis is worth catching. Jarvis, who has played guitar with Dwight Yoakam and Lucinda Williams, co-wrote *Still I Long for Your Kiss*, recorded by Williams for the soundtrack of *The Horse Whisperer*. Jarvis has just released his second solo album *Far From Perfect* (Watermelon).

### If you're going

Dave Alvin and the Guilty Men plus Duane Jarvis perform Saturday at the North Star Bar, 27th and Poplar streets, Philadelphia, at 10 p.m. For information, call 215-235-7826.



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