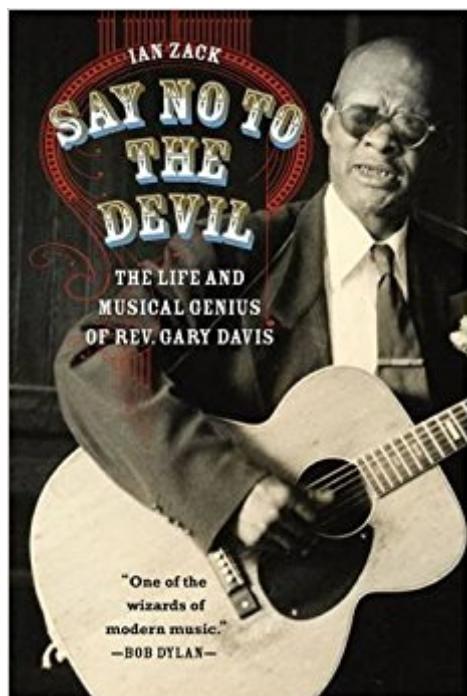


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# Say No To The Devil: The Life And Musical Genius Of Rev. Gary Davis



## Synopsis

Who was the greatest of all American guitarists? You probably didn't name Gary Davis, but many of his musical contemporaries considered him without peer. Bob Dylan called Davis "one of the wizards of modern music." • Bob Weir of the Grateful Dead "who took lessons with Davis" claimed his musical ability "transcended any common notion of a bluesman." • And the folklorist Alan Lomax called him "one of the really great geniuses of American instrumental music." • But you won't find Davis alongside blues legends Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Despite almost universal renown among his contemporaries, Davis lives today not so much in his own work but through covers of his songs by Dylan, Jackson Browne, and many others, as well as in the untold number of students whose lives he influenced. The first biography of Davis, *Say No to the Devil* restores "the Rev." • remarkable story. Drawing on extensive research and interviews with many of Davis' former students, Ian Zack takes readers through Davis' difficult beginning as the blind son of sharecroppers in the Jim Crow South to his decision to become an ordained Baptist minister and his move to New York in the early 1940s, where he scraped out a living singing and preaching on street corners and in storefront churches in Harlem. There, he gained entry into a circle of musicians that included, among many others, Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie, and Dave Van Ronk. But in spite of his tremendous musical achievements, Davis never gained broad recognition from an American public that wasn't sure what to make of his trademark blend of gospel, ragtime, street preaching, and the blues. His personal life was also fraught, troubled by struggles with alcohol, women, and deteriorating health. Zack chronicles this remarkable figure in American music, helping us to understand how he taught and influenced a generation of musicians.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Winner of the 2016 Association for Recorded Sound Collections Award for Excellence in Historical Research in Recorded Blues, Gospel, Soul, or R&B (Winner of the 2016 Association for Recorded Sound Collections Award for Excellence in Historical Research in Recorded Blues, Gospel, Soul, or R&B)"[A] magisterial biography. . . . Half saint, half sinner, all singer-songwriter, . . . the Rev. Gary Davis is that blind man you brushed by on your way to the stadium to see the big act perform. Zack's brilliant account compels us to pause for a long look at an artist who was always there, even if we didn't see him." (Wall Street Journal 2015-05-11) "Long time comin' and here at last! This fabulous book is for those who want to read, hear, and troll the depths of Americana music for incredible artists. Once you come across Rev. Gary Davis, you are forever hooked by his creative brilliance. From his earliest recordings to his last, Zack illuminates what made "the Rev" so unique. Enjoy yourself! It's a good'un! • (Taj Mahal) "Zack has plumbed the depths of this fascinating, complex character . . . to cover the long career of a blind bluesman who honed his trade at rent parties, chitlin' circuit dives, and hootnancies, influencing a generation of folk and blues guitarists. . . . For those unfamiliar with this blues great, or folk-blues buffs ready to immerse themselves once again in his legend, Say No to the Devil is a tuneful read. • (Acoustic Guitar 2015-04-06)"This isn't a dry who-did-what-when kind of biography. It's like Zack followed [Davis] around, making note of the boy teaching himself to play the guitar, to the confident blues performer who could play on any stage. And this isn't the Disney version. Davis was a complicated man who lived in difficult times." (Sing Out! 2015-02-26)"Finally, the biography that Rev. Davis deserves. Ian Zack takes 'Blind Gary' out of the footnotes and into the footlights of the history of American music. Like John Coltrane, George Gershwin, Jimi Hendrix, and the rest of the very few, Davis' genius was unique and uncompromising. How he was able to take gospel and blues and create a style that was so unique and so powerful is a story that had to be told. Now, thanks to Zack's careful research and unbounded respect for his subject, we finally have insight into the art and environment that was Davis' life story. With this biography, Davis can finally take his place in the pantheon of the greatest of American musicians." (Steve Katz, cofounder of Blood, Sweat & Tears)"Rev. Gary Davis had a rich and colorful but challenging life. Zack has put together the pieces of Davis' life in an exciting and detailed way. This biography

reads like a novel! It details the life and times of Davis, as well as the evolution of his music and the influence he had on generations of black and white musicians. A must-read for anyone interested in the blues, the folk revival, or the life of a true American genius." (Stefan Grossman) "Davis was a complex and difficult man, and it is to Zack's great credit that this comes through, along with the obvious admiration so many young musicians had for him." "Say No to the Devil provides plenty of material to interest fans and newcomers alike." • (Elijah Wald) "Zack presents a detailed but readable account of the extraordinary life of Gary Davis, the blind son of poor sharecroppers in South Carolina. This book will satisfy blues aficionados and those interested in roots music and early twentieth-century culture." • (Library Journal 2015-04-06) "[In this] biography of the blind preacher and street musician, the man who Keith Richards said, 'started it all for me,' . . . Zack gives an informative account of Davis's life, both the sacred and profane. . . . A readable and faithful portrait of the times as well as the man." • (Times Literary Supplement 2015-04-10) "Say No to the Devil is the definitive biography of Gary Davis; it's comprehensive, balanced, scholarly, generously illustrated, carefully annotated, and . . . well written. Unmissable." (Blues & Rhythm) "Very well-researched. . . . The sheer number of sources Zack consults and cites lends the book authority. . . . As the first book-length study of Davis, [Say No to the Devil] is welcome." • (Choice 2015-10-07) "Zack paints a vivid picture of this brilliant guitarist, including stories of legendary jam sessions in Davis's New York apartment which included Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, Josh White, and Lightning Hopkins. This is a most welcome addition to our blues literature." • (Blues News 2015-10-07) "One of the Best Music Books of 2015" • Zack, in the first full biography of [the Rev. Gary Davis], follows the story from his early, poverty-ridden childhood in the South, his early days as a bluesman, his move to New York and his calling to be a preacher, and his later "discovery" through the folk boom and the students he taught who carried on his legacy. Zack had access to many of those students and others who knew Davis, lending greater insight into a man who fought the devil perhaps because he was really so much like him. . . . A well-written work." • (Chris Heim, host and producer, KMUW's Global Village 2015-12-28)

Ian Zack is a New York-based journalist whose work has appeared in the New York Times, Forbes, and Acoustic Guitar. He worked as a concert booker for one of the oldest folk venues in New York, the Good Coffeehouse, where he got to know some of Davis's students.

I didn't need to read a book ABOUT Reverend Gary Davis to know what a giant in music he was, and still is. It was Gary Davis, channeled through the first Hot Tuna album in 1970 that got me

started listening to this guitar genius. Jorma of Hot Tuna was playing songs like "Death Don't Have No Mercy" and "Hesitation Blues," and I just had to find out who this Davis guy was who was credited with the songs. A somewhat novice guitar player at the time, I had no idea how Rev. Davis did what he did -- I was hooked for the rest of my life on this man and his incredible music. To this day I consider Rev. Davis to be one of the, if not the, best guitarist I've ever heard. And though he'll never know it, he has been my musical mentor and inspiration throughout my guitar playing days. Born in the rural South in 1896, blind at a young age, Gary Davis took to the guitar like it was made for him. He would help support his mother, then himself, by street performing, oftentimes a dangerous activity for a blind black man. He had countless guitars stolen over the many years of walking the streets of various South Carolina towns, and later New York City. But from the streets he absorbed the music around him, blues, gospel, spirituals, ragtime -- all was food for Gary's creative mind and spirit. He would soon be turning out original tunes, as well as unique and complex arrangements of traditional songs. Over the years, even as he remained relatively unknown to the general public, aspiring guitarists flocked to his Queens home to learn at the foot of the master, young folks who would carry on Gary's legacy, Bob Weir, Bob Dylan, Ernie Hawkins, Stephen Grossman, Steve Katz, Roy Bookbinder, Janis Ian, Woody Mann, Ry Cooder, and dozens more. One anecdote that illustrates the high esteem in which Rev. Davis was held by other guitarists is this, from page 209. As Davis's "Miss Gibson" was fitted with a new set of strings, a bloke who'd been watching the transaction asked Davis if he'd play a song or two, and Davis obliged. "Do you play guitar?" Davis asked. "Yes, I do," the young man said. "Well, would you play something for me?" "No, I could never play in your presence," the man said. As he led Davis out of the store, Power asked a store employee who the shy young guitarist was. "That's Eric Clapton." It wasn't until one of his students, Ernie Hawkins, now a guitar wizard in his own right, produced an entire series of books and DVDs in which he reveals the secrets behind the Reverend's unique style, that I was able to finally learn to play his music the way he played it. This is an amazing book, a wonderful biography and tribute to this under appreciated giant of American music, a guitar wizard, Reverend Gary Davis. Here is the story of an uncompromising musical genius, warts and all, and how we are all so lucky to have recordings of some of his greatest works. Read the book, but better yet, seek out his music.

Superbly written and utterly engrossing. Ian Zach has written a book not only about a musical

genius, unknown to most people, but an inspiring book about overcoming adversity. This book is very hard to put down as I followed Rev. Davis' life from his childhood to his passing away on the way to a concert. I cannot recommend this book highly enough. Even those who are unfamiliar with Rev. Gary Davis will find his story a compelling component of American history. What a wonderful book!

This is a fantastic book, of a musical genius, and a spiritual man. I saw the Reverend perform in 1969, and have spent my life trying to play his guitar arrangements. He is a complete man, fully realized. His music, guitar playing and singing all do the same thing, glorify his God, and continue his legacy. Ian describes the life and times of Rev. Davis with riveting detail and eloquence. This book is a necessary addition to the Reverend's music as it allows us to understand where he came from, and who he was. I cannot recommend it enough. Please buy it and read it. Please keep the Reverend's music and faith alive. How happy I am that Ian wrote this book.

I'm a huge Gary Davis fan and often felt frustrated by the tangential coverage he would receive in most books on the blues. This book fills in those gaps very nicely, providing a much more intimate portrait of a great and highly influential performer. Gary taught a host of "kids" who have gone on to define the Piedmont style of acoustic guitar blues. Through his students, Davis has had an enormous impact on how we think about blues guitar. This gives a full account of his life, with all its challenges and accomplishments. Highly recommended.

Fantastic read, beautifully and respectfully written, tremendously researched. Rev. Davis' spirituality shines through, as does the magnificence of his playing. I was lucky to see him many times at Bucks Rock Work Camp, where Barry Kornfeld was musical director (or some such) and Van Ronk was a regular visitor. And later in the Village. Davis' voice shines through the books, and I can hear him from life or recordings in Zack's fine writing. Easily the very best recent book on the first generation blues and gospel musicians.

I'm in mid book right now, and have been very impressed with the amount of research and background information. Having met and learned from Rev. Davis, I've spent much of the last 45 years immersed in his music, and in the story of his life, and, like many of us Rev-o-philes, I've heard most of the tales before. But Ian Zack has successfully gotten the reader past the icon and into the nature of the human Gary Davis, and the immense hardships he endured along his road to

what was ultimately a success story. Highly recommended.

Rating w/o review

Wow, well written and rather exhaustive presentation of the Rev's life. It jibes and expands upon what Ernie Hawkins had related to me about his time learning from him, and what he was like as a person. Really deep and spiritual person, a true genius of the guitar. Also a true survivor tale as a poor, blind person of color in the Jim Crow south. He influenced so many players and singers back during the folk revival.

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