

Rev. Gary Davis - Harlem Street Singer (1993)

Written by bluesever

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01. Samson and Delilah 02. Let Us Get Together 03. I Belong to the Band, Hallelujah! 04. Pure Religion 05. Great Change Since I Been Born 06. Death Don't Have No Mercy 07. Twelve Gates to the City 08. Goin' to Sit Down by the Banks of the River 09. Tryin' To Get Home 10. Lo, I Be With You Always 11. I Am the Light of the World 12. I Feel Just like Goin' On

Gary Davis was born blind, black, and broke in South Carolina in 1896. Big obstacles, but he also was blessed with talent and got paid for his guitar-pickin' by the time he was a teen. Ordained as a minister at age 36, he changed his song inventory to Gospel and hymns exclusively. He ended up in NYC, performing at mostly Black churches and on the streets. In the late '50's, the "Folk Revival" of blessed memory provided him a brief celebrity beyond those venues. This album was recorded in 1960 at the Jersey jazz studio of the legendary engineer Rudy Van Gelder. You get 44 minutes of soul survival stuff here, and any blues buff ought to own it. The more casual fan may have to listen a few times to really like Gary's vocals, but his guitar work is fun from the first chord. The recording quality is excellent. To me, the only flaw is that each song would have benefitted from one fewer sung verse, and one more instrumental passage. It's not that Gary's voice is any more rough than other bluesmen. The problem is that the lyrics of these church songs belabor the point and get a bit repetitious. Still, he was one of the best of his kind. Imagine him at 64, alone in the recording booth for three hours, doing 20 songs, of which these are supposedly the best takes of the best 12. He had not recorded anything in four years: in fact, he had only recorded in 1935, '54 and '56 prior to this August 24, 1960 session. On that day, Kennedy and Nixon were running for president, the Pittsburgh Pirates and the Yankees were heading toward a classic World Series, and I was living about 40 miles south of the studio, getting ready to begin 11th grade. Rev. Davis was doing something more important: preserving the Black church songs of early 20th century for posterity. --- William E. Adams (Midland, Texas USA)

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