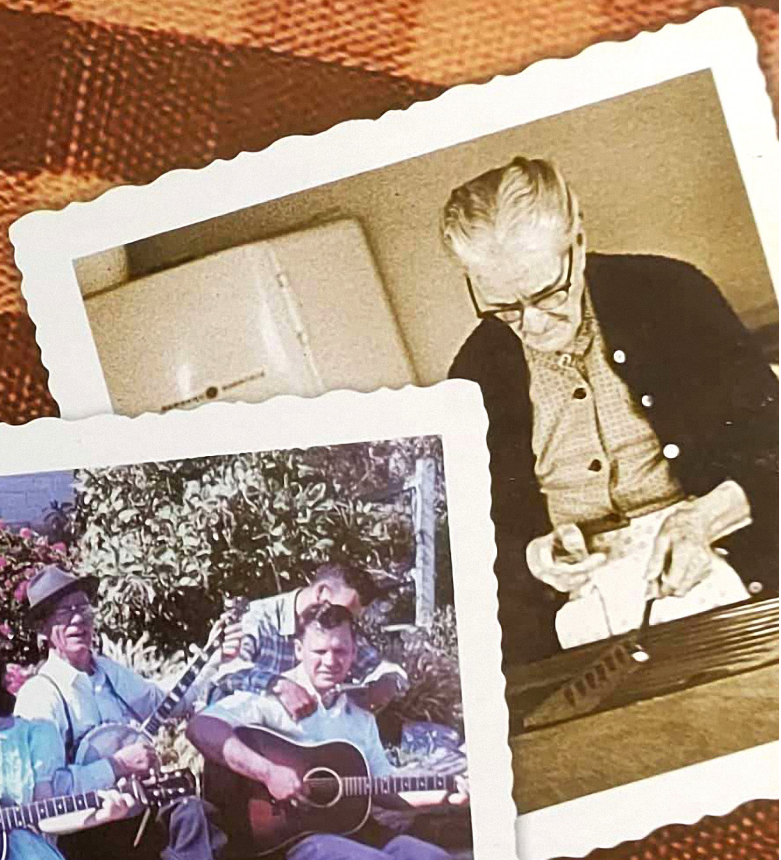


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FULL CIRCLE—LONG MAY THE MUSIC LIVE



REMEMBERING DERROLL ADAMS • STU JAMIESON ON RUFUS CRISP
PLUS DANCE BEAT / HERE & THERE / REVIEWS



Remembering Derroll Adams

by Gérard De Smaele,
Patrick Ferryn, Tucker
Zimmerman



courtesy Danny Adams

Adams (R) with Jack Elliott (L) as "The Cowboys," 1957.

The American banjo player and singer, Derroll Adams (1925–2000) spent more than half his life in Europe, a good part of it in England, and the majority of it in Belgium, where he settled in the '60s. For many young people America became a model. For many artists, meeting Derroll Adams and his musical partner, Jack Elliott held a true fascination. It was often their first contact with American folk music.

After the war, England became the host country of many American musicians like Alan Lomax, Peggy Seeger, Tom Paley, and Ralph Rinzler (who was also a student in Paris). Later in the '60s, prominent banjo players and figures of the old-time music scene toured throughout the Continent. Mike Seeger with the New Lost

City Ramblers, Roscoe Holcomb, Cousin Emmy, and Ralph Stanley appeared in folk clubs across Europe. In the '70s Art Rosenbaum, Bob Carlin, the Red Clay Ramblers and others also played these clubs. Bill Keith, Tony Trischka, Bela Fleck, Joe Val, and Del McCoury often visited Europe to the delight of the growing number of fans of bluegrass music. Oak Publications and Folkways records were available in music stores.

The folk revival shaped a new generation of folk artists and inspired new musical genres. If the folk boom of the '60s has been partially forgotten by the younger generation, the traces these artists left behind are still visible and vibrant. See for example the Swiss Jens Kruger, the Italian Rafe Stefanini, the Czechoslovakian Prucha Banjo Company, and many more folk

music lovers in Europe. The name of Derroll Adams stands out as one of the most important of these pioneers of the European folk revival. In partial retirement from the music circuit since the end of the '80s, he was celebrated in Kortrijk, Belgium in 1990 and was an annual guest of the Tønder Folk Festival in Denmark. In July 2001, he was the posthumous star of the Brosella Folk Festival in Brussels, Belgium, and an album with his best friends' contributions was released in 2002. Belgian film producer Patrick Ferryn will soon complete his tribute to Derroll with a 90-minute documentary film.

Following are three reminiscences about Derroll Adams. Thanks to Danny Adams-Levy and her daughter Rebecca for their support and help in writing this article - GD

He Was Born In Portland Town

*"I was born in Portland Town,
I was born in Portland Town,
Yes I was, yes I was, yes I was"*

In the hearts of those who love his music, "Portland Town," an emblematic anti-war protest song, will forever be associated with Derroll Adams. For several decades, he sang this song—of which the first line is a proud evocation of his origins—on folk music stages across Europe. It illustrates the man's deep affection for his roots and for his family's past, even though he left the U.S.A., rejecting its social model, to spend most of his life on European soil, primarily in Belgium, where he eventually settled and made his home. His childhood may not have been an example of tranquillity, but Derroll still liked to talk about growing up in what turned out to be the end of the somewhat mythical Wild West.

Derroll Lewis Thompson was born in Portland, Oregon, on November 27, 1925. His father, Ernest Raymond "Tom" Thompson, was first a juggler and then a tombstone polisher. His mother, Elizabeth Gertrude Kerr, was of Scottish descent—her ancestors were pioneers who traveled the famous Oregon Trail in covered wagons from Arkansas to settle down in the new Northwest Territories. This ancestry is the source of Derroll Adams' first name: a souvenir of a fictional Scottish hero (Captain Derroll). However, Derroll's family soon preferred to call him by his nickname, "Buddy." Elizabeth left her husband, who had become an alcoholic. After he died, she re-married Jack Glenn. But the man was rough and brutal to Derroll, and so the couple split. In 1930, Elizabeth and her son moved into an apartment house in Portland. One of the tenants there, George Irwin Adams, came to assume the role of Derroll's missing father. He was a good and generous man—"a true old western gentleman," as Derroll often repeated—and whose name he later assumed. His grandfather, "Grandpa Adams," had fought the Indians and had known Wild Bill Hickock personally. One day, young Derroll asked him if he too had a six gun. Grandpa Adams' only answer was to half-open the tails of the greatcoat he always wore, allowing Derroll a glimpse of the sawed-off shotgun that was strapped to his leg. Derroll's Aunt Nelly, a former saloon dancer, used to live with one of Kit Carson's companions and saw the man get shot dead in a duel right in the middle of the street. Derroll could spend literally hours telling such stories.

However, his youth was not all folklore and idleness; the boy quickly learned about endless journeys on America's roads against the backdrop of the Great Depression's darkest years. George, Elizabeth, and he were forever having to move from town to town throughout the Northwest. Wherever he landed, Derroll immediately tried to strike up friendships, only to be forced to soon move again. These constant upheavals affected him deeply. Derroll often said that his only true home was the back seat of his

parents' old Chevy. Cuddled up in this shelter, he would listen to his favorite hill-billy music on the radio; especially the broadcasts of the popular Grand Ole Opry. In this way he discovered with wonder Jimmy Rodgers, the Carter Family, Uncle Dave Macon, Clarence Ashley, Rachel and Oswald, Lulu Belle and Scotty, Stringbean, and others. More importantly, he heard for the very first time the tinkling sounds of the five-string banjo—even though he had no clue at the time as to what this weird instrument might actually look like. He played the harmonica and invented tunes inspired by the plaintive and harrowing whistle of steam trains. Show business was another wonder to him: he liked to imitate Maurice Chevalier and mimic Buck Jones, his favorite western movie hero, and Lefty Carson, the singing cowboy. His parents also worked regularly as seasonal laborers on large farms. There, African-American and gospel music moved him. Much later, he worked in the timber industry as a "windfall buckner" (cutting to length trees that had fallen naturally) in the vast forests of Oregon and Washington. He loved these huge expanses more than anything else for their untouched nature and the simple but tough life of the Native Americans he met there. He always cherished these memories, and many of them shaped his philosophy of life.

Derroll was 16 at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor—December 7, 1941. Full of idealism, he lied about his age to join the Army but was discharged after five months. He then joined the San Francisco Coast



Derroll Adams in Portland, ca. 1956.

Guard, where he trained as a combat diver. The ongoing stress and brutality of the training, as well as the cruelty of some around him, affected and destabilized him seriously. But this trying experience also provided him with an opportunity to learn more about the five-string banjo, an instrument with which many of his comrades in arms from the South were quite familiar. They gave him a chance to hear some good banjo pickers first hand. Back in Portland after having been discharged for suffering from psychoneurosis anxiety, he studied at Reed College's Museum Art School on a scholarship from 1945 to 1950. Two major events left a mark on his 20th birthday: the birth of Scott, his first child, mothered by his high school sweetheart, Adeline, whom he had married in 1943, and a gift from his mother: a five-string banjo. Derroll immediately gave up on the guitar and mandolin, which he had been practicing half-heartedly, and started playing the banjo, without knowing exactly how to tune it at first. A year later, he left Adeline for Lorene, with whom he had two children: Mark and Deborah. It was during this time in his life that he gathered a lot of folksongs and country music, listening to Bascom Lamar Lunsford, Buell Kazee, Dock Boggs, Burl Ives, Roy Acuff, Cousin Emmy, Woody Guthrie, and Leadbelly. He also discovered yoga and Zen Buddhism. On the political level he adhered to Senator Henry Wallace's movement, the Progressive Party. During a hootenanny at Portland Community Center (hoot was the term used in
(continued on next page)

courtesy David Halloran



Geert Currinckx

Playing a gig at the folk club T'sleutelgat, near Brussels, 1975

those days), he met Pete Seeger. At the end of the concert, Pete showed him—at last—how to properly tune a five-string banjo, which came as a revelation to this dedicated student. Making tremendous musical progress, he took an increasingly active part in Wallace's movement and even played at political gatherings. However, he was soon disgusted by some of the leaders' opportunism and turned to other, more sincere militants such as Jim Garland and his sister, Aunt Molly Jackson, politically committed musicians who were quite famous at the time.

Having completed his studies in 1950, he took a number of small jobs: radio-announcer, taxi-driver, window-dresser, etc. He also broke up with Lorene to live with Elizabeth, a painter he had met at the Museum Art School. They decided to leave for Mexico, but along the way they settled down in San Diego, California. Then they moved up to Oceanside, and this is where their son Gregorio was born. They stayed there for a while, living in a trailer, before moving to Los Angeles. To make ends meet, Derroll found various jobs again, such as driving trucks for Max Factor. One of his colleagues, Sid Berman, noticed his musical ability and introduced him to a band of young musicians from Los Angeles who formed *The World Folk Artists*, and included Frank Hamilton, Weston Gavin, Odetta, Jo Mapes, Guy Carawan, and Marsha Berman. On one summer night in 1954 Sid took him to Topanga Canyon, to the herb farm of Will Geer—a successful

actor (the colorful old trapper in *Jeremiah Johnson*) who lived on the fringe of society because of political affiliations slightly to the left of the left. Around him Will had gathered a community of various artists, movie and theatre actors from the Hollywood scene, poets, musicians and entertainers, many of them sharing the widely held ideas of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, the gurus of the Beat Generation. Derroll was introduced to a talented guitar player and singer with the looks of a cowboy—Jack Elliott—and people urged them to play something together. They agreed on Jimmy Rodgers' "Muleskinner Blues," but Derroll did not have his banjo with him. Never mind! Bess Lomax-Hawes (folklorist Alan Lomax's sister) gave him hers. That night, Derroll Adams and Jack Elliott gave an outstanding performance, which brought down the house. This was the beginning of a long friendship and of a peerless duo. Derroll and Jack played in bars, clubs, and on some West Coast campuses. In Los Angeles they also made new acquaintances such as James Dean and Krishnamurti.

In 1955 Derroll left Elizabeth and their two children, Gregorio and Tamara. He played gigs here and there, contributed to Elmer Bernstein's original soundtrack for *Durango*, a western movie directed by Hal Barlett and Jules Bricken (starring Jeff Chandler), and started composing songs. The decision to leave his family and his meeting with an old couple who had lost their only child in Korea inspired him to compose "Portland Town," a poignant protest song. But McCarthyism had become deeply rooted in American social life and it was not politic to advertise such views at the time. Later, singer Barbara Dane popularized the song in the United States, and other American artists recorded it, including Joan Baez, The Kingston Trio, Josh White, Jr., Bob Harter, and Dick Weissman. In Europe, Alex Campbell, Colin Wilkie and Shirley Hart, Finbar Furey, Long John Baldry, Van Morrison, and others did the same.

In the meantime, Jack Elliot married June Hammerstein, a young actress. Derroll was best man at their wedding and played a frenzied "Rich and Rambling Boy," changing the lyrics slightly for the occasion. June's mind was set on one dream—of going to Europe. She convinced Jack to follow her to London and he played in the streets and in pubs there. In "Ramblin'" Jack Elliott, London's youth discovered a genuine rep-

resentative of American folk music and the songs of Woody Guthrie, Jimmy Rodgers, Leadbelly, Jesse Fuller, Roy Acuff, and Hank Williams, as well as traditional cowboy songs. Around the same time, London was awash with the skiffle craze popularized by the Kingston Trio, Lonnie Donnegan, and Johnny Duncan. Jack Elliott's success was instantaneous but he missed his friend Derroll. Invited by Jack and June, and despite being broke, Derroll arrived in London mid-February 1957. The three friends lived in Lambeth North, in a hovel called "The Yellow Door." Derroll and Jack played in the streets and in Soho pubs and coffee bars—June passing the hat—as well as in fashionable nightclubs. Derroll's baritone contrasted wonderfully with Jack's near-countertenor nasal voice and the mix of banjo and guitar was a great success. They performed in Alexis Korner's club, The Roundhouse, The Cousins, and in The Blue Angel. As The Ramblin' Boys, they also recorded their first album with a local label, Topic. At the end of that contract, Jack, June, and Derroll decided to tour the continent. They went to France, then to Italy where Derroll and Jack recorded two more LPs. During a stay in Paris, Derroll met Alex Campbell, who became a dear friend. The two busked in Saint-Germain-des-Pres. He also fell in love with Isabelle, a distinguished decorator who worked for Christian Dior. They settled in Brussels, married in June of 1958, and became associates in a free-lance, fashion-shop window-dressing business. This union gave birth to Vincent and Catherine. During the same year of 1958, Derroll and Jack, now known as The Cowboys, performed in the American Pavilion at the Brussels World Fair. The next year, Jack and June parted ways, which marked the end of the trio's adventures. Jack Elliott returned to the United States, where he was soon labelled as "the spiritual son of Woody Guthrie and spiritual father to Bob Dylan" and became a prominent figure on America's folk music scene.

Derroll played on the streets and in pubs only occasionally after Jack's departure. He lived near the Grand-Place of Brussels and was a regular at the "Welkom," the favorite cafe among "Bohemians," as they were called back then, and other assorted Beatniks. Many were impressed by this tall picturesque and unique figure: stringed jacket, threadbare blue jeans, worn out cowboy boots, Stetson, and banjo—an original sight in our land indeed! His songs must



Fernand Hellinckx

Busking in the Petite Rue des Bouchers, Brussels, near the Café Welkom, 1960s.

have sounded quite original to most listeners too, but it was mostly the man's brilliant charisma, and reassuring coolness that people noticed when they first met him. His deep, warm voice told the songs more than it sang them. His banjo style was most delicate and superbly clean (listen to his masterful rendition of "Pretty Little Miss"). The man was a born entertainer who could capture the most varied of audiences—even those with no inclination for the American idiom—with his infectious cheerfulness that was a subtle mix of humanity and tenderness plus a good pinch of humor. The icing on the cake was his kindness and a matchless touch of class. He was also, simply, a poet. Songs such as "The Sky," "The Mountain," "The Valley," and "Love Song" provide ample proof of his enormous talent. The apparent simplicity of his banjo style amplifies the clarity of his lyrics. This combination enabled him to go directly to the heart of the matter with seemingly very little effort, hitting home most of the time. And that is what makes him timeless.

He was in London in 1965 when he met Donovan and took him under his wing. He appeared briefly in *Don't Look Back*, a documentary shot by American filmmaker Donn Alan Pennebaker during Bob Dylan's first United Kingdom tour. In this film, he is seen introducing Donovan to Dylan. Later Donovan dedicated his most colorful and enchanting song to Derroll. "Epistle to Derroll" is a token of his affection and admiration for "the banjo man with the tattoos on his hands."

Still, let there be no illusion, every rose

partner. Rebecca was born three years later. The couple settled down in Antwerp. Until the end of the '80s, he gave countless concerts, both in small, intimate folk clubs and in prestigious concert halls in Belgium and many other European countries including England, Ireland, France, Holland, Germany, Switzerland, and Denmark. He recorded several more LPs and his reputation grew steadily, though not among the general public. Derroll always walked the byways, far from the trappings of fame and media attention. Nevertheless, he became a model, or at least a first-class reference for many professionals: Ian Anderson, Dave Arthur, Long John Baldry, Billy Connolly, Barbara Dane, Dick Gaughan, Arlo Guthrie, Frank Hamilton, Shirley Hart and Colin Wilkie, Maggie Holland, Paco Ibanez, Andy Irvine, Bert Jansch, Wizz Jones, Dr. John, Ronnie Lane ("The Small Faces"), Iain MacKintosh, Youra Marcus, Jo Mapes, Ralph McTell, Elliott Murphy, Odetta, John Renbourn, Jacqui McShee, Rod Stewart, Hans Theessink, Danny Thompson, Happy and Artie Traum, Roland Van Campenhout and Hannes Wader. Like Donovan, several others of his friends wrote songs for or about him, and they are all beautifully crafted: Alex Campbell ("The Banjo Man"), Finbar Furey ("Derroll in the Rain"), Allan Taylor ("Banjo Man"), Tucker Zimmerman ("Oregon").

In 1972 Derroll played at the Cambridge Folk Festival and in 1976, Donovan persuaded Derroll to accompany him on a U.S. tour. They were applauded at the Bottom Line in New York and at Roxy in Los Angeles. It would be the last time Derroll would see America. In 1978, he attended a Woody

has its thorns and so Derroll fell prey to alcohol and had several close encounters with death. He ended up divorcing and losing his children, once again. During the year 1967, still in London, Derroll recorded the wonderful LPPortland Town, accompanied by Jack Elliott and Alex Campbell.

In 1970, Derroll Adams married Danny, his last

Guthrie tribute in the Stadium of Ivry (near Paris, France), and in 1981 he performed at the Olympia in Paris (opening for Doc and Merle Watson). In 1985 he came to the Tønder Folk Festival in Denmark for another major Woody Guthrie tribute, at which time he read some of Woody's lyrics and introduced a glittering array of fellow artists, among them Pete Seeger, Odetta, and Arlo Guthrie. In 1990 Jack Elliott made it his duty to be present in Kortrijk, Belgium, for a magnificent tribute concert organized secretly by Derroll's old time friends on the occasion of his 65th birthday. Derroll and Jack toured Europe together one more time in the summer of 1991, in Belgium and in Holland (with Roland Van Campenhout, Youra Marcus, and Tucker Zimmerman). From then on Derroll's public appearances were limited.

When failing health kept him away from the stage, Derroll Adams went back to painting. He was not just one of the many painters of his time. Keeping his distance from any form of academics, he produced original, surprising, and thought-provoking pictorial work. He was a genuine creator through and through—forever in a creative frame of mind, tortured in the prison of his own failing body. "Free your mind" was written on the door to his studio. He drew, wrote poetry and lyrics, composed melodies, fooled around with his banjo, enjoyed classical music, but also listened with enthusiasm to various kinds of new musical styles and sounds. He returned to his old passions with renewed energy: history, philosophy, esotericism, tarot, kaballah, and I Ching, as well as Chinese and Japanese music. With its meaningful silences, the latter ended up playing a fundamental role in his poetic inspiration and his banjo style, which he wanted to be at one with his Zen principles. On one of his banjo heads he inscribed, in Chinese calligraphy, a Zen thought that sums him up wonderfully: "All the ways to laugh. And the last laugh is at yourself, but with compassion and love."

Having become a living legend in the hearts of many "the folk singer of folk singers" received many visitors at the Antwerp retreat he shared with Danny and Rebecca. Some of them came to seek the advice of a much-esteemed master. The respect he enjoyed was a source of both surprise and delight to him. Derroll Adams, who turned folksong into a way of living, considered himself an entertainer more than a musi-

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With Doc Watson (L) at the Olympia, in Paris, April 21, 1981.

cian. One day, in Ireland, patriarch Ted Furey, Finbar's father, told him: "you're a real *shannachie*" (storyteller). Derroll considered this to be the most beautiful thing ever said about him. He travelled a few more times to the Tonder Festival—at which he remained a distinguished guest—and, at the invitation of Arlo Guthrie, he made his final appearance on stage there in August 1999. His voice was weak but his words were full of appreciation for the public who had always given him so much love. Glory and wealth were never among his fantasies. He used to thank the gods—the cats, as he liked to call them—for giving him the life he had had, with its joys and sorrows and the incredible luck of making so many friends, he who, after all, was only "just a kid from Oregon." Derroll Adams passed away in Antwerp on February 6, 2000. His boots will be hard to fill and we will always miss his amazing enthusiasm and zest for life.— Patrick Ferryn

Derroll Adams: Crossing Over

Those who have known Derroll Adams and then, sooner or later, picked up and read the biography of Charlie Poole, *Rambling Blues*, (*Old-Time Music*. London, 1982) by Kinney Rorrer, will have found similarities between the two personalities. Both were banjo players and singers. Both gave a substantial part of their lives to their music. They both loved to ramble, to drink strong liquor, and to meet people. Charlie Poole died of drinking at an early age. It is a miracle that Derroll survived his own

drinking ordeal that ended in a horrible delirium tremens in 1969.

Both men made a strong impression on the people they met. What is written about Poole also describes one of Derroll's most obvious characteristics: ". . . it seems that everyone who ever saw him, even if for only a few minutes, has a story to tell about him . . ." Derroll Adams is a legend. Even to his closest friends he was larger than life.

But other aspects of Derroll's life are also the subject of endless discussions. Why did he walk out on wives and children? Drink so much whiskey? Charm so many girls? There were episodes in his life when he definitely displayed socially unacceptable behavior, yet the legend has been stronger, and in the endless conversations his friends are still having today, you'll hear stories about a fascinating and very unconventional man. Many found comfort in his quiet, low voice and sense of humor; others a sense of protection and infinite freedom. He sang songs and told stories to his audiences, and at the same time he gave the impression that he was listening to them.

His authenticity and his refusal to conform often cast his professional career in obscurity. Derroll is known to have played thousands of small folk clubs and street corners where he always took time to speak with people, to listen to their tales, and to share the stories of his own exceptional, eventful life. His life had an enormous influence on the way he approached and interpreted his songs. He was always experimenting with people, trying to find a

path beyond the conventional, and he was certainly subversive when he spoke. He was a traditional musician dedicated to breaking rules and crossing over borders.

Derroll Adams had no formal musical education or training. At the time he took up the banjo in Portland, Oregon, where he was born in 1925, he had no contact with other banjo players. Consequently he was entirely self-taught. He once said that the younger generation, unlike himself, had the opportunity to hear all the recordings and study the printed methods, none of which were available during the Depression years or even immediately after World War II. It was a solitary start until he met Pete Seeger, who gave a performance at Reed College in Portland where Derroll was an art student.

Derroll's banjo style was fundamentally simple and personal. He always told other musicians that his style was easy to learn. He used his banjo mostly to accompany his voice created strong interactions between his banjo and his voice. He never played instrumentals, and thus must be considered primarily a singer. His style evolved with time, and after the first energetic recordings he made with Jack Elliott, his style slowly shifted to become more sober and quiet. For example, listen to his late version of "Pretty Saro" (65th Birthday Concert—see discography pg. 21). He never played with a fiddler. His interpretation of traditional songs was elevated, precise often intricate and nearly inimitable. But he always tried to make that complexity unapparent. (Listen to his *Portland Town* LP.)

As a student in Portland, after the war, he would go to the public library and listen to the new recordings issued by the Library of Congress. In this way he heard Bascom Lamar Lunsford. On the radio he listened to the Grand Ole Opry: the Carter Family, Hank Williams, Jimmy Rodgers, and banjo players like Uncle Dave Macon. At the beginning Derroll sounded a bit like Lunsford, but it is unlikely that Derroll knew anything about Lunsford's technique as it was explained later in Seeger's instruction book.

Derroll was mainly an up-picker. He used two forms of double thumbing (index finger and thumb lead) to create a melody line. In this respect his style was reminiscent of Wade Mainer. He also brushed the strings with his middle finger. All of this is well within the tradition of the classic, old-time banjo style, but Derroll often combined that middle finger brush with a ham-

mer-on/plucking-off action of the left hand, frequently moving his left index or middle finger between two strings and acting on them simultaneously. This method, characteristic of his style, allowed him to play very softly, giving the impression that he only caressed the strings. It was this style that impressed the young Donovan (see his notes on Derroll's CD *Songs of the Banjo Man*).

Derroll did not own expensive or loud instruments. He always played an open-back banjo, using a rag under the bridge to eliminate high harmonics. On *Portland Town* he played an English Windsor banjo (New Windsor 1905) with a clad-metal/wood resonator such as can be found on the S.S. Stewart models from 1890. Although this banjo, which he picked up at the Clifford Essex shop in London, had been designed for classic use, Derroll did not know about that style of playing. He worked for about 15 years with that Windsor, and in the '70s the German instrument maker Framus made a Derroll Adams model fitted to his specifications: longer neck, rounded-off fretboard, deep pot, arch-top style tone ring, and Scruggs peg tuners. He received three of these banjos from Framus. He gave one of them to his friend, the Irish musician Finbar Furey. The model sold well all over Europe in the 1970s, indicating that Derroll was considered to be *the* banjo player in Europe.

Derroll preferred Black Diamond strings and at the beginning he used the G tuning with a capo, almost exclusively. Later he adopted other tunings and changed, for example, the tuning of his famous "Muleskinner Blues" from G to C. He frequently used the full C tuning, with the first string tuned to E, and consequently he frequently broke that string in performance. He also liked the G minor tuning (2nd string tuned to Bb) and sometimes the "sawmill" (2nd string tuned to C).

His hands were large and distinctive. In addition to his tattoos he had long, hard nails which he carefully shaped and sanded with a match box. This helped him to produce a precise sound. He never used finger picks, and although he loved Kyle Creed's style of playing, he did not know that Creed used a self-made reverse metal pick (like a thimble) for his clawhammer style. The expatriate Derroll knew about good banjo players like Creed because he also traded at the Collett and Dobbel stores in London.

Derroll's aim was to produce, through perfect execution, a conscious simplicity.
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Patrick Ferryn

With Tucker Zimmerman (l), Antwerp, November 1998.

Discography

When Derroll Adams came to London in 1957 he recorded with Jack Elliot for the Topic Record Company. This company still exists and has re-issued much of that material. That same year Derroll and Jack toured as a duo throughout the continent, and in Milan, Italy they recorded approximately the same songs for Joker Records. Many of these recordings have been re-issued and are available on CD.

Derroll began recording as a solo artist in 1967, starting with the *Portland Town* LP with Jack Elliott and Alex Campbell as supporting musicians. The '70s were his most productive years. The following list represents Derroll's essential work. An asterisk indicates that the material is currently in distribution.

Jack Elliott and Derroll Adams, recorded in London, in 1957: *The Rambling Boys* Topic Records, London, 10T14, 1957

Roll On Buddy Topic Records, 12T105, 1964 (notes by Alexis Korner)

Ramblin' Jack Topic Records, TSCD-477, 1995 * (CD) (notes by Wizz Jones)

Ramblin' Jack Elliott with Derroll Adams, Early Sessions Tradition (Rykodisc) Records, Salem - London, TSCD-1083, 1999 (CD)

Jack Elliott and Derroll Adams, Folkland Songs and Riding in Folkland/ Joker Records (Saar Milano), Milan, SM 3023 and 3024 1957 (re-issue 1966) (2 LP)

America, Folk Songs, West Ballads and America, La Storia Del Folklore Americano Selection of America, Folk Songs, West, Blues Promo Sound AG, DCD-768, 1969, (1996-2 CD)

America, Jack Elliot (sic) & Derroll Adams (sic) Promo Sound AG, Music of the World, AAD-CD-12543, 1997 (CD)

Derroll Adams, Portland Town Decca Records (Ace of Clubs), London, SCL-1227, 1967 (notes by Bill Yaryan)

Derroll Adams, Feelin' Fine The Village Thing Records (Transatlantic), VTS-17, 1972 (notes by Andrew Means / Derroll Adams)

Derroll Adams, Movin' On (with Hannes Wader) Intercord - Xenophon, Germany 26-438-2 U, 1974 (notes by Carsten Linde and Jerken Diederich)

Derroll Adams, Live! EMI-IBC (Sound Superb), Belgium, 4M048-23599, (1975) (Re-issue-BMG-Ariola Express, Holland, 74321-231052, 1994 CD)

Derroll Adams, Along The Way EMI (Best-Seller), Belgium, 4C062-23567, 197

In Hommage a Woody Guthrie Le Chant du Monde, France, LDX74-684/85 1978 (3 songs)

In Folk Friends Folk Freak Plattenproduktion, Germany, FF 3001 and 3002 (notes by Carsten Linde) 1978 (3 songs) (2 LP) (Re-issue-Wundert, te Musik, Germany, TUT-CD-72.160) (2 CD)

Derroll Adams, Songs of the Banjoman Folk Freak, Germany, FF 404016 (1984) (notes by Donovan) (Re-issue from diverse LPs) (Re-issue-Wundert, te Musik, Germany, TUT-CD-72.175) 1997 (CD distributed by BMG Company and by Appleseed)

Derroll Adams, 65th Birthday Concert Waste Productions, Belgium, WP9101 1991 (notes by Derroll Adams) (distributed by Appleseed)

He worked hard to attain this simplicity. If his style appeared simple, it was due to his mastery. His subtle rhythmic complexities resemble asymmetrical jugglers doing different things with different parts of their bodies yet displaying a great sense of freedom. Incidentally, his father was a juggler. Nowadays a lot of musicians try to imitate each other. This is probably the primary danger of schools and banjo methods. Derroll, on the other hand, was a true old-time banjo player with a distinctive style—like all the old-time banjo greats.

It is more than likely that if Derroll had not left America, if he had been on stage with Jack Elliott in New York in the '60s, his style would have been adopted by many banjo players and that he would have inspired a younger generation of musicians in this country, as he did in Europe.

— *Gérard De Smaele*

Remembering Derroll

We almost never talked about music. We shared several stages at various folk festivals, and once in a while we'd be up there at the same time, playing and singing the same song. And I spent more than few hours with him in different recording studios. But on those occasions we got the practical matters—which key and how we might get the song started—out of the way in a hurried minute. And though I wrote Derroll a few songs, and he ended up performing a couple of them, he never once asked me for an explanation, or even my opinion. I'd send him a song on cassette and the next time I'd hear it would be coming from the loudspeakers of some festival stage and Derroll would be up there singing the words as if he'd been performing the song all his life, or as if, in fact, he'd learned it as a child.

We talked about the spirit. The invisible body inside of us, that moves us, that makes us see and hear, that reaches out and connects us with everyone, and perhaps survives the death of the physical body. That whole other world we seldom experience—premonitional dreams, telekinesis, ESP, re-incarnation, astrology, clairvoyance, tarot, kaballah, UFOs, Edgar Cayce, Carlos Castaneda—"Tuck, there's this book you just gotta read." Zen Buddhism, I Ching, peyote—there was no order to his lessons and topics, just wild leaps of the imagination that would swoop out of "Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain" and glide smoothly into Native American shamanism. Derroll talked and I lis-

tened and absorbed. I knew about most of the subjects he was teaching—a little bit at least, enough to keep up, though I'd never experienced any of them from The Derroll Adams Point of View. And what a unique point of view it was. Each time we got together he transformed my perceptions, lifted me up until my feet were an inch off the ground. Each moment became magical, special, highlighted, spotlighted. I lived in a state of grace in those hours I spent with Derroll.

Derroll pulled this magic trick on a lot of people, and he did it for entire audiences too. On stage, Derroll was pure spirit. At times, the spirit of an old tree in the backwoods of Oregon, and at other times the spirit of Coyote, the young trickster, the joker, and the fool. And that is what made him a great banjo player and singer.

I was never a folk artist, though some gentle, generous folk tried to convince me that I was and gave me a chance to get up on their stages and sing my songs for their audiences. My background is classical music and whatever was on the running edge of the rock scene in the '50s and '60s. I'd never liked folk tunes. The folk music scene in San Francisco and Berkeley seemed too contrived and hypocritically commercial. But somehow that never got in our way. Adams' traditional two-step, toe-tap Appalachian mountain songs that he turned into fields and valleys filled with rivers of his own imagination had almost nothing in common with my own backbeat, rhythm 'n blues what-ever-it-was wild poems. Yet there was never any musical conflict between us. Over the years Derroll's music began to seep into mine. I learned his songs from his recordings, just like a fan.

Derroll thought that music knew no boundaries and liked to talk about his theory that the banjo came from China and how the strings should be tuned to a pentatonic scale. After a gig in Antwerp we went into a bar for a beer and found ourselves in the middle of a disco scene. We stayed for an hour, listening, the drum beats pounding in our bones, and watching a dozen dancers go through their routines. Derroll was delighted, saying later that some day he would record a disco album. Banjo and drum machine. Later, at the age of 63, he told me that he'd love to get involved with techno music. "Rap too," he said. And this too, this open mind, is what made Derroll a great banjo player and singer.

Many musicians of all kinds knew him. I

met Loudon Wainwright at an outdoor concert in Brussels. The first thing he said to me was, "Do you know Derroll?" The second and last was, "Do you have his address?" One summer afternoon in 1998, I was walking the streets of Salem, Oregon and stopped by a poster in a shop window: "The Oregon Trail Band." I phoned the office. "The band does two of Derroll's songs every night," she told me. In 2001 I was sorting through my deceased mother's record collection from the '40s, '50s and '60s, heavy vinyl dance bands right up to the latest from Nashville. And there—right in the middle—*Joan Baez in Concert*. "Portland Town" and in parentheses, part of his name: "D. Adams."

He once told me the story of "Portland Town." It was about the Korean War. I was in California, on a beach at night, somewhere south of Monterey, down past Morro Bay. Pismo Beach I think it was. I came upon this campfire by the ocean, a man and his wife, middle aged. They said 'sit down, stranger, and join us'. I sat down at their fire and they shared their food and drink with me. They were from Portland. My hometown. We traded stories and we got to know each other better. Later, when we'd had a few more drinks, they broke down and told me the story they'd been wanting to tell from the start. They'd just lost their boy in the war. Killed in action. Their only son. In the past six months. The woman—the mothersaid, 'I ain't gonna have no babies no more.' I'll tell you, man, it was the saddest of stories I'd ever heard. I had tears coming down my face, but they weren't crying, this man and this woman. They were simply staring into the fire. They still couldn't believe it had happened. I was born in Portland Town . . . yes I was, yes I was."

Derroll loved stories. He loved telling stories. He had hundreds of them, including a few he would never tell because they would make him look like a braggart. I never once heard Derroll brag about himself, and I am sure he never told anyone the story of how he saved my life. It was a hot summer day in Neuchatel, Switzerland and we went out on the lake in a small boat—his wife and his baby girl, and me and my wife, and Derroll at the controls of the outboard motor. Out in the middle I decided to take a swim. I stripped to my shorts and jumped in. I swam alongside the boat for about ten minutes, then I began to tire and force myself to keep up with the boat. Soon I was exhausted. Derroll cut the motor and waited for me to catch up. I dog-

paddled up, reached and grabbed the gunwale with both hands, and tried to pull myself out of the water. Impossible. The bottom side of the boat sloped away and there was no way to press any part of my body against it to get leverage. I was all out of arm strength too. I said to Derroll, "head back to shore and I'll just hang on." The nearest shore was a thousand yards away and I wondered if I could really hang on. I was past exhaustion. I thought I was going to drown. But Derroll didn't start the boat. Instead, he reached over the side, grabbed a fistful of elastic in the back of my shorts and lifted me out of the water. Like a drowned dog. His arm was a crane. It swung over and gently set me face down on the bottom of the boat. And though I was no heavyweight at 160 pounds, I outweighed Derroll by maybe 20. One arm; one smooth motion. He never trembled; he didn't drop me. I could have been a 10-pound sack of potatoes he'd just picked up at the market. "Better put your clothes on. We're comin' up on some folks in a minute or two."

Derroll was strong. Very strong. He never worked out or tried to keep in shape. He'd earned those muscles as a kid in Oregon, working on the farms and in the woods. He'd built his muscles as a boy and had never lost them. Great physical strength is not a quality you'd expect from a 50-year-old man who played banjo with the softest of touches.

In a children's park one day he explained Aikido—the Japanese martial art in which the students are dressed like butterflies. He lifted his arms and performed a delicate dance of such precision that I could only stand breathless and amazed. I was even more amazed when I realized that his dance was improvised. Derroll was making it up, moment by moment, effortlessly.

Derroll was generous too. He gave himself away at all times. He gave himself away to audiences and he gave himself away to strangers on the street. On a winter day in the mid-1980s, Derroll took me on a nostalgia walk through the old streets of Brussels where he'd lived in the 1960s. He took me into the Welcome Cafe and we spent the next two hours talking to a crowd of people that had known Derroll in the past. It took us an hour to walk from the Welcome to the Grand Place as many, many people stopped Derroll to say hello. It took us another hour to get out of the Grand Place and up to the train station. We were waylaid every ten steps. So many people knew him, and he remembered most

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of their names. All of this 20 years later from a 50-year-old man who had the firmest of handshakes.

The night we met was typical of all the other nights in our future—unpredictable and graced with spirit. It was the spring of 1971. I sang at a festival in Charleroi, Belgium. Both Derroll's name and mine were on the poster, though I didn't know there was a poster until later. Earlier in the evening I'd played a festival near Brussels and had been traffic-jammed and rained

upon for four hours straight by the time I got to Charleroi, already more than an hour late. Which is to say, I was very nervous and ready to go out of my mind. A thousand people in the pouring rain, the makeshift stage at one end of the parking lot, already drenched because of a leak in the canvas roof. I sit down next to the drip. I touch a microphone and it zaps a quick jolt of electricity up my arm to my shoulder. I tune my guitar. The lights go out.

(continued on next page)

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out of the rain, out of the short-circuited festival, out of Charleroi, Belgium and we were dealing with a new kind of atmosphere. We could hear the spirit breathe. We could see it glowing from the corner of our eyes.

Derroll said, "There's this book you should read," and from his jacket pocket he took out a paperback copy of *The Greening of America* by Charles Reich. He handed it to me, but I held it off and instead reached into my jacket pocket and fished out my own copy of *The Greening of America*.

"I'm about half way," I said.

"Well, how about that," he replied, "that's where I am too, these days—about half way." ■

—Tucker Zimmerman

Gérard de Smaele, born and raised in Belgium, began playing the banjo in 1966, teaching himself from the Pete Seeger and Earl Scruggs books. Ten years later he visited the U.S. and began hearing and learning to play from Roger Sprung, Kyle Creed and the many younger players he met at summer festivals. He has written a history of the banjo (Banjo a Cinq Cordes), and played banjo on several CDs with his friends, Back Door (see review in OTH vol. 8 no. 6), Texas and Sally Ann. A new recording, Cornfields, will be released in May.

Patrick Ferryn, who is also Belgian, is an independent film-maker and long-time lover of American folk, old time and blues music. He met Derroll Adams in 1964, while he was playing a gig in a vaulted cave near the famous Grand-Place of Brussels. He is now working on the post-production of a documentary/tribute-film about Derroll Adams.

Tucker Zimmerman, singer-songwriter, composer, novelist and poet was born in San Francisco in 1941. In 1966 he traveled to Italy on a Fulbright scholarship and has since remained in Europe, living in both England and Belgium. A long-time friend of Derroll Adams, he wrote several songs for him.

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Everything goes out. The stage is dark, dead. The only thing visible is a thousand rain-streaked shadows out there in the parking lot, waiting, praying. I'm ready to scream. Maybe even smash my guitar. I feel two hands — one on each of my shoulders. Not pushing down, or even just resting, but rather lifting me up. Then his bass voice, "Don't worry, Tuck, we'll soon have everything under control." Of course it was Derroll. I'd heard about him; he'd heard about me. Another West Coast reverse-pioneer, living in Belgium and wandering around Europe on a few songs and shoestring. I'd play a club in Flanders. "Of course you know Derroll." A hundred clubs. The same assumption.

And now there he was, standing behind me, lifting me out of my chair with his hands on top of my shoulders. I followed him off the stand and into an equipment van that belonged to the Savoy Brown Band. Mats rolled up. Old rugs. Pillows. Derroll slid the door closed. Rain pounded on the roof. A street light just outside gave the place a dim kind of moonlight. Derroll, seated cross-legged in front of me, then proceeded to roll one of the largest hash bombs I'd ever seen. We didn't even come close to finishing it. Two puffs and we were

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