

Classic American Fingerstyle Guitar

An Interview With Dakota Dave Hull by Gloria Goodwin Raheja

Since his arrival in the Twin Cities in 1969, Dakota Dave Hull has performed and recorded with some of Minnesota's finest acoustic musicians, including Kari Larson, Peter Ostroushko, Butch Thompson, Cam Waters, Eric Peltoniemi and Bill Hinkley. Over the last several years he's also been performing with Phil Heywood, Peter Lang, Dean Magraw and Tim Sparks as one of the Minnesota Guitar Wizards. During the last four or five years, he's moved from mostly flatpicking to mostly fingerstyle guitar and he's become primarily a solo performer of instrumental music. His 2002 CD, *Sheridan Square Rag* (with contributions on two tunes from Kari Larson on guitar and tenor guitar) and his entirely solo 2004 recording, *Loyalty Waltz*, are journeys through the landscape of 1920s, 1930s and 1940s Americana, punctuated by fascinating detours through Dave's own compositions. The landscape he traverses is a varied one, ranging from spirituals and gospel songs to ragtime, 1920s pop tunes, fiddle tunes, string band music and more. No respecter of genre boundaries, Dave listens to and absorbs music from all these sources and plays elegant and satisfying arrangements of the tunes he finds, and original music inspired by those songs. Dave wrote on the liner notes to *The Loyalty Waltz* that it never ceases to amaze him "that blues, jazz, country music, old-time, bluegrass, soul music, ragtime, [and] popular music... sprang from the same primordial mud. You hear it in the early recordings, before everything got compartmented... People played together too, with ideas and sounds crossing back and forth across ethnic, racial and generational lines." In his two most recent albums, as in so much of his earlier music, that common history, that fertile soil of American music, is conjured up as one listens to the narrative flow of the records, and yet each song is stamped with Dave's own distinctive approach to the guitar, his own musical sensibility and unwavering good taste, and his mastery of guitar tone. And in every collection of tunes he plays, there is a unique blend of lyricism and narrative power, solemnity and playful humor, delicacy and digging in with the right hand for a big and powerful sound; no one who's ever heard Dave play would mistake him for another guitarist. He's also made significant contributions to the Minnesota music scene through his ensemble playing, his work for other musicians in the recording studio, and his Thursday morning KFAI radio show.

I spoke with Dave Hull in his studio in Minneapolis, and a few later emailed follow-up queries and responses have been folded in to this interview.

GGR: In the past you were known mainly as a flatpicker, but you've characterized your most recent work as "classic American fingerstyle guitar." How did that change come about?

DH: Well, it wasn't so much a change as you might think. First, it's all guitar playing, and second, I started out as a fingerpicker back in high school, though I really didn't do a lot of it for many years, except at home. But really, by the mid-1980s I had picked it up again, I was writing rags and recording some fingerstyle stuff, even that early.

When Kari Larson and I decided to quit playing together on a regular basis, back at the end of 2001, it seemed for a variety of reasons that it would be worth it to see if I could put together enough fingerstyle material to record and perform on my own. So that's where I put my efforts. Flatpicking is, by nature, more suited to ensemble playing, although not entirely and I still flatpick a few tunes every night. On the other hand, fingerstyle, while it works wonderfully in a group environment, is perfect for most solo work, too. I started as a fingerstylist and never really gave that up; I'm just doing more of it now.

GGR: As you moved in to specializing more in fingerstyle, did it make a difference that you were here in the Twin Cities, with its remarkable concentration of superb fingerstyle players?

DH: Well, it's always helped. To me, it's really not so much about fingerstyle or plectrum or whatever, but rather just about guitar playing. There's always been a fabulous community of guitar players in this town, it's the biomagnetic center of the universe, and that's why! [Laughter] I don't know why that is, but we're fortunate that there are so many great guitar players in the Twin Cities. From the beginning, when I came here in 1969 and lived on the West Bank and hung out at the Coffeehouse Extempore throughout the '70s, it was great. We were all learning how to play and helped each other out a bunch. People came and people left, but there was a wonderful sense of being in this together. We shared the things we were learning with each other, almost on a daily basis. I find myself wishing that there was a scene like that today. I think it's hard now to be young and trying to break into this business. Now, of course, I've known most of the players around here for quite a while and I feel so fortunate and so grateful to be able to count so many great people among my friends. The short answer to that question would be: it's been a blessing.

GGR: You play a fascinating array of interesting and unusual vintage and new guitars and we're surrounded by them here in your studio. Can you say something about the ones you've used on your last two recordings?

DH: Well, I used five different guitars on *Loyalty Waltz*. My big flattop, a Gibson Jumbo, was made in 1935, I play that on a few of the tunes. They'll have to pry that one from my cold dead fingers.

I've got a Gibson-made smaller body guitar called a Kel Kroydon. It's essentially a 12 fret Gibson L-0 or L-00 from about 1930 and it's a remarkably great sounding instrument that's also incredibly cool to look at. It may look like a toy, but it's a great guitar. A friend of mine owned it for years, and the first time I played it I was blown away by it, it was one of the nicest little guitars I've ever played for my style, and so I told him that if he ever wanted to sell that guitar, I'm your man. And lo and behold, he decided to sell it. It's a KK-1, and as you can see it has twin birds of paradise painted on the top! The KK-2, which I'd love to find one of, has an Hawaiian volcano scene painted on it.

I need one of those too, obviously. [Laughter... Folks who know Dave or have seen him at his gigs will know that he seldom goes out of the house without one of his signature Hawaiianstyle shirts.] Unfortunately the Kel Kroydon is an extremely delicate guitar, so I can't take it out much. I took it on a tour to California a couple of years ago, and it really didn't like to travel, so it basically lives here in my studio at home, and occasionally I let it out to do a show in Minneapolis, and that's about it. It's mostly a studio instrument.

Then there's my Epiphone Recording E, which is also very cool and has an extremely unusual voice. Almost like it's halfway between a flattop and an archtop. It was also made around 1930.

I have a more recent National steel guitar, a Style 1 from the year 2000. That instrument is so good that I sold my old National Style 1 from 1931 and never looked back, even though that 1931 model was a great guitar.

And finally, on *Loyalty Waltz* I played a 1998 piccolo guitar that Charles Hoffman [the Minneapolis luthier] made for me. Several years ago in New York I heard someone playing a *terz* guitar, which is a smaller-bodied nylon or gut stringed guitar meant to be tuned up to G or A. They use them a fair amount in Mexico, and actually I think Tim Sparks has one. I know he used to have one, at any rate, but I digress. I was infatuated with the sound and when, several years later, I found a late '30s three-quarter size Gibson L-00 or L-0 (I still don't really understand the difference between those two models) I decided to try stringing it that way, and it was wonderful, more than I had hoped for. Unfortunately the neck was three-quarter size too, and I was stumbling all over myself, all the time. It was a great guitar, sounded great, but it was next to impossible to play. So I took it to Hoffman's with the idea of getting a new one made. I've been friends with Charlie Hoffman for many years and I have a 1976 custom guitar that he made for me that I traveled with for years. I also used it for a couple of tunes on *Sheridan Square Rag*, so I was well aware of his talent as a luthier. So we looked at that little Gibson and traced it and so forth, and sort of updated the design, and Charlie made a new instrument for me. So why not have a cutaway, why not have some extra frets, if you're updating the design anyway? So there are 24 frets on that instrument, and the neck is 1 and 3/4 inches wide. It occurred to me that I've always liked the sound of mahogany topped instruments too, and that that might increase the sustain on such a small instrument. As of yet there isn't really a spruce topped version to compare it to, but I think I was right. And because it's tuned up a fourth, it has a different sort of tonality, a great different tone that I really like. We talked about how the instrument should look too, from the standpoint of trim and finish. So the design of the piccolo guitar was a collaboration between me and Charlie. And now just recently I've acquired the second Hoffman piccolo guitar, and that guitar is the result of a collaboration too. I'm rapidly falling in love with that instrument, I think it's going to be wonderful. I can dig in more on it, and the tone is already there. I'm rather amazed. I've been playing them both, and I'm going to have a tough choice on my hands. I can only keep one and at this point I think it'll be the new one. I believe Charlie may actually start making these on a more regular basis. I have one other new guitar, a National M-2 baritone that showed up last fall and it's been changing my life. It's the anti-piccolo. You'll definitely hear it on my next record.

In general though, I love guitars from the '20s and '30s. Old wood, aged wood, wood that's been a guitar for awhile changes somehow. I think maybe it takes awhile for it to figure out that it's not a tree anymore, that it's a guitar. Once that happens it really starts to sound great. It opens up and the tone becomes marvelous. They just keep getting better and better. Apart from the instruments I used on *Loyalty Waltz*, I have a number of other old guitars, including a 1929 National Triolian

The 1920s and '30s were the first golden age of acoustic guitars. I think we're in a second golden age and that some of the stuff being made now will outshine everything once the guitars have aged some. My 30 year old Hoffman guitar is a prime example of that—a wonderful instrument that has aged well and sounds old now. And it's only going to get better.

I'm always looking for old guitars too. I'd love to find a good Martin OM-18 from the 1920s, but they're out of sight money-wise now so I'd have to get real lucky.

GGR: In the liner notes to *Loyalty Waltz* you wrote about ideas and sounds that crisscross ethnic and racial lines, that come from a common stock of American musical traditions. That's of course a central theme in the history of American music. Did you have this in mind when you chose the tunes you wanted to include on the album?

DH: I don't know that I think about it in those terms before the fact, as I'm deciding what I want to play and record. When I record an album, it's really more about how it goes together, how I'm playing a particular tune. I don't really think a lot about where they come from, it's more of an emotional decision. But it's intriguing to look at it after the fact and think, "Oh, it's interesting that, say, "900 Miles" and "Jesus Is A Dying Bed Maker" fit so nicely next to each other on the album, especially considering that the first obviously came out of the white tradition, and the second out of the black tradition. But they're not all that different.

GGR: On that album there's also a lovely tribute to Dave "Snaker" Ray you wrote, called "Snaker's Gone," played on your National Style 1. How did you come to write that?

DH: The title kind of came to me in a flash, not long after Dave died in November of 2001; Dave's first solo album was called *Snaker's Here!* I was on the radio, on KFBI, when he died on a Thursday, on Thanksgiving Day, and Tony Glover called in to the show to let me know, and I just went and got a copy of his *Snake Eyes* album, which I think of as his masterpiece, and played it, and people started calling in and asking about Dave, because I was playing so much of his music. I delivered the news to our community that day. It was very sad. When I went to try to write something of a tribute to him, the tune began to take shape and it began to sound like a funeral march in my head. I called Dave Ray a friend. He was supportive of my career from the time I got to the Twin Cities in 1969. He was a good listener and a good talker and a real inspiration as a musician and guitar player.

GGR: Over the years you've played several times with Doc Watson. What was that like, and what kinds of influence did he have on your playing?

DH: As a kid, the first time I heard Doc was really an epiphany. I didn't know it was possible to do those kinds of things with the guitar, and I knew, immediately, that that was what I wanted to do. I think the tune that did it was "Tickling the Strings." Later on I was fortunate enough to meet Doc, play a couple of gigs with him, and have him as a guest on my "Hull's Victory" album. It was quite an honor, but Doc is the kind of guy who can put you right at ease.

One thing I remember about the recording session was that by simply being there Doc managed to get stellar performances out of all of the musicians. I think the one thing that sticks in my mind the most is Butch Thompson's piano break on "Ragtime Annie." Butch is incredible even on a bad day, but this was something else. The feeling of being there, of being a part of it, was amazing. One of the true highlights of my career.

GGR: You were close friends with Dave Van Ronk. What do you see as his place in the history of American music?

DH: That's a really huge question. If you read Dylan's book, or most any history of the folk revival, Dave looms large. He was one of the first, maybe the first revivalist to play country blues, one of the first guitarists to experiment with ragtime, Jacques Brel, and most anything else that caught his fancy. His pallet was huge. The thing I admire most about Dave's work is that no matter what he was doing you could always tell who it was. Style trumps genre, in my book, and Dave had style in spades.

I learned a ton about the art of arranging music from Dave; he really encouraged that aspect of my music. It's one thing to play a tune or a song but it's something quite different to think about the settings, the pace, and so many other things. Dave was truly a master of this stuff.

Dave was the first to record a Dylan song. The first to record a Joni Mitchell song. He had a great ear for talent and a real knack of finding a great song. He liked to say that he remained blissfully on the sidelines in the wars between the traditionalists and the modernists, and his book (the list of songs he performed) certainly bears that out. The amazing thing is no matter the source, the finished product always sounded like a Dave Van Ronk arrangement. He could take songs as diverse as "Michigan Water Blues," "Been on the Job Too Long," "Urge for Going" and "Mack the Knife" and make them fit together seamlessly in a set or on a record in a way that would make the listener think: "of course! Why hasn't anyone else ever thought of that?" Style trumps genre.

I could go on and on about Dave but there's just too much. His autobiography, "The Mayor of MacDougal Street" is a wonderful history of the New York folk revival up through about 1969. When I read it, it was like sitting in Dave's living room after a great meal (did I mention he was a world-class cook?) sharing stories into the night.

It should be required reading for anyone interested in folk music, roots music or the revival. It's also one of the funniest books I've ever read. I'm truly lucky to have known him.

GGR: How in general do you go about the process of writing and arranging?

DH: I'm a noodler. I sit around and just play the guitar at home a lot. Most times it doesn't go anywhere, but once in awhile I'll come up with something entirely new or the beginnings of an arrangement of something that already exists. Often times it'll be a "mistake" that sets me off on some new track. "Six of One, Half a Dozen of the Other," on *Loyalty Waltz*, is a good example of that. I grabbed the guitar, didn't look, thought I was in G and it turned out I was in F#. And I heard that *thing*, and I liked it, so it became a tune. Once you get the *thing* you're halfway home. All you have to do is surround it with interesting music to complement it and you're there. At that point you have to learn it, come up with an interesting arrangement for it, and that isn't really any different than arranging any other tune for guitar. I hope that makes some kind of sense.

GGR: The sound quality on both your recent CDs is superb, and I know you recorded them yourself here in your studio. What kind of recording set-up did you use?

DH: I'm a minimalist. I set up one mic and find the sweet spot. I use one mic because I don't think that two mics sounds like a guitar. I find that that is the best way to not only make a guitar sound like a guitar, but to make a specific guitar sound like a specific guitar. I want you the listener to be able to tell the difference between the Kel Kroydon, the Epi-iphone, the Jumbo or whatever else happens to be on the album. So I use a good tube mic, a good tube pre-amp, and mix it with as little processing as possible, put a little reverb on it, and a little bit of limiting, which basically serves to make it sound more natural, to get it back to sounding like what it sounded like in the room where it was played. That's what I do. Once I've recorded and done some editing I take the stuff over to Steve Wiese at Creation Audio and we mix and master it there. He's got great ears, we've worked together for thirty years, and he has a ton of great gear that's perfect for what I do.

GGR: What other recordings have you done in your studio recently?

DH: Let's see, I recorded Phil Heywood's last CD, *Banks of the River*, and I co-produced a CD for Tim Eriksen called *Every Sound Below* for Appleseed. I did an album for Cam Waters and I've done Pop Wagner's last couple of albums and Lonnie Knight's, too. We're just finishing up Lonnie's new one now. Eric Peltoniemi and I have started working on a project together. We've known each other a long time, and 2007 will be the 40th anniversary of the first time we shared a stage together. We'll probably do a few concerts together, too. I'm doing a small project of Somali storytellers reading traditional Somalian folk stories in both English and Somali, and that's a lot of fun. I did a couple of projects for National Resophonic, too. Parts of *Artists in Resonance II* was recorded here—I recorded Charlie Parr, The Ditch Lillies, Joe & Vicky Price, Kari Larson, and myself.

I recorded some wonderful solo mandolin of Kari's for the newest version of their audio catalog, as well as my newest toy, the M-2 baritone. I did all that stuff at my Arabica Studio in Minneapolis, but the producing thing really started in earnest in the early 1980s when I produced John Koerner's *Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Been*. I've done a number of things at other studios, too.

GGR: It's been almost two years since your last album. What new projects are you working on now?

DH: Well, I mentioned that I'm working on a project with Eric. I'm also working on a solo album of gospel music, hymns, spirituals and that sort of thing. I've always found that all roads in traditional and roots music eventually lead back to this stuff and I think it's undeniably the deepest tradition. People have done all manner of art since before history started being recorded trying to make sense of why we're here, of what it's all about. I've come up with some interesting arrangements of "This Train Is Bound for Glory," "Wayfaring Stranger," a medley of the Carter Family's "Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone" and the southern hymn "The Christians' Goodnight," the Martin Luther hymn "A Mighty Fortress" (believe it or not—it sounds incredible on the new National baritone guitar), a couple of tunes from the Sacred Harp tradition and a few other things. The list is by no means complete or final. I might redo a couple of tunes I've recorded before, too. I'm really not sure when it'll be available; that pretty much depends on when I finish the actual recording. I'm not really on a schedule, but I'm hoping to be able to offer it by the spring. I'm also touring quite a bit more these days. I have the luxury of working with two agents and they're both wonderful. I think their combined goal is to keep me out of town permanently. I'm doing a couple of split-night shows with Peter Lang in the near future, one in Illinois and one in Pennsylvania. And Phil Heywood and I are going to do something at Oak Center in early December. And then Kari and I are going to do some Christmas shows this year, so it should be a very interesting few months.

GGR: What have you been listening to lately? Has it had any effect on your playing or choice of tunes?

DH: As you know, I do a weekly radio show on KFAL. A benefit of that is that I'm forced to listen to a ton of music, all the time. I gravitate towards stuff from the 1920s and 1930s mainly, although I've been finding some earlier recordings that are making my socks roll up and down, too. Genre isn't that important to me; in fact the further you go back the closer the various "genres" are. I go nuts when I hear Louis Armstrong on a Jimmie Rodgers recording or a brass band version of "L'il Liza Jane." It just excites me. I'm sure it's had an effect on my playing and my choices, but it's indirect usually, kind of an osmosis sort of thing. Once in awhile I'll hear something that I decide I want to learn and go after it, but usually I just start playing a tune and then I get excited and it evolves into something I can perform.

There are a number of great websites out there these days for people interested in vintage music. I adore redhotjazz.com, which is mostly 1920s jazz, but not entirely. A lot of great information there, too. cylinders.library.ucsb.edu is a wonderful collection of early cylinder records that have been digitized. It proves that the popular music of 100 years ago could be as bad as the popular music of today, but there's a lot of great stuff there as well. juneberry78s.com has a great collection of old-time music, a pretty good collection of early country blues also. It's not very well organized or documented, but if you know about this stuff there are some great finds here. dovesong.com has a good collection of gospel music, especially the gospel quartets from both the black and white traditions. It also has very little documentation, but it does have a lot of great music.

I think the main thing to me is that it's about the music more than it's about the guitar or any specific instrument. The more stuff I listen to the more stuff filters through into my guitar music, or at least that's my hope.

Dakota Dave Hull has a website, dakotadavehull.com.

Contributor Note: Gloria Goodwin Raheja is a professor of anthropology at the University of Minnesota. Beyond her academic work in the anthropology of India, she is interested in contemporary American fingerstyle guitar, pre-war acoustic blues, old-time music and West African guitar music, and she is writing a book on music in the Appalachian coalfields in the 1920s, with a focus on the sonic and social worlds of the guitarist Frank Hutchison. She teaches occasional courses on blues and American popular music at the University, and she is a member of the Minnesota Guitar Society.

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