

Ramblin' Jack Elliott – A Career Overview

When your *given* surname is Adnopoz, you can hardly go on to enjoy a fruitful career as a performer by calling yourself, Ramblin' Charlie Adnopoz. Frankly, there's no ring to it. In truth, our hero is the son of a doctor, was born on 1st August 1931 in Brooklyn, New York and christened Elliott Charles Adnopoz. During his childhood Elliott was much taken by the western movies of Gene Autry, to the extent that he believed the life portrayed on the screen still existed. It's of little wonder that by his mid-teen years, restless for adventure, he adopted the name Buck Elliott, and ran off with Colonel Jim Eskew's travelling Ranch Rodeo based which was based out of Waverly, New York. In time, Buck gave way to Jack. Paid two dollars a day to groom the horses, after two months *on the road* his parents traced him and Elliott returned home.

One of the rodeo clown's, Lost John Carruthers, had advised him to finish high school, which he did. Although Jack made a couple of attempts at being a *model* student – initially at the University of Connecticut and then at, Adelphi College, Garden City, NY – increasingly his preference became hanging out in Washington Square Park, NYC playing guitar. A school friend, Todd Fletcher, had taught him a couple of chords. Jack learned more chords and about playing technique from Tom Paley, later a member of the New Lost City Ramblers. Elliott has quoted the late Merle Travis as being his favourite guitar player – “Ever.” [ED. NOTE. Purely by co-incidence, in next week's issue, there will be a piece on Travis]. In the late forties, compered by Oscar Brand, the local radio station WNYC broadcast a show called *Folksong Festival*. Aged eighteen, Elliott had an epiphany while witnessing Woody Guthrie perform on the show. A couple of years later, Elliott discovered that Guthrie was recovering from an acute ruptured appendix and was confined to bed in Coney Island Hospital, New York. Armed with his guitar, he figured he would go meet his musical hero. Hell, he'd even throw in an impromptu performance for Woody, right there in the ward. Following their meeting, for many years Guthrie maintained that “*Elliott sounds more like me than I do.*”

Guthrie took Elliott under his wing, and the pair became inseparable travelling companions for a number of years. In due course, Jack's skills as a musician were honed. A couple of years later, when the pair ended up in Southern California, they headed for Will Geer's estate in Topanga Canyon. Years later, Geer played the wise and kindly paternal grandfather, Zebulon Walton, in that seventies/eighties television phenomenon, “**The Waltons.**” Geer, a graduate of the University of Chicago, actor, sometime folk singer and lifelong *agitprop* radical, was blacklisted by the House Unamerican Activities Committee in 1951. [ED. NOTE. The word *agitprop* is derived from, *Agitator* and *propagandist*]

At Topanga, Elliott met a number of fellow folk musicians including Bess & Butch Hawes, Guy Carawan, but it was with Derroll Adams, a banjo player, that he subsequently formed a performing partnership. The duo foundered in June 1955 when Jack married actress June Hammerstein. Soon afterwards the newlyweds moved to Europe. In England, Jack's musical career flourished and within a couple of years he had a solo album available on Topic Records. Not surprisingly, the six-song collection was titled “**Woody Guthrie's Blues.**” When Derroll Adams arrived in England, they revived the partnership and promptly cut “**The Ramblin' Boys**” for Topic. From time to time Jack would return to the States to perform, even spending a year in Southern California in the late fifties. Back in Europe, at the dawn of the sixties, Elliott undertook European tours with The Weavers and Pete Seeger. In 1961, Jack returned to the States.

By that stage, Guthrie was incarcerated in the Memorial Hospital at Greystone Park in New Jersey. Huntington's Chorea had been diagnosed years earlier and the disease was progressively taking over Woody's body, a piece at a time. Woody survived for another six years. At Greystone Elliott met, for the first time, a fresh-faced kid from Hibbing, Minnesota. Christened Robert Allen Zimmerman, the world would soon know him as Bob Dylan. Dylan, another adherent of Guthrie's music, had come to pay homage at the feet of the master. History was repeating itself, but Dylan never got to *go on the road* with his inspiration.

As I noted earlier, in the beginning, Jack sounded like [and practically imitated] Guthrie. While performing in Europe he had matured, and Ramblin' Jack Elliott had evolved. Whether a cover tune or an Elliott original, Jack's music was now a *marriage* of folk, blues and country music. According to Elliott, it was he took Dylan to the New York musician's union, Local 802, to sign up for membership. In the early sixties Jack recorded albums for the Prestige and Monitor labels. As the sixties folk music explosion took hold he signed with Vanguard Records. His twelve-track debut for Maynard Solomon's label was simply titled “**Jack Elliott**” [1964]. His rendition of A. P. Carter's “**Will The Circle Be Unbroken**” featured the harmonica player, Tedham Porterhouse. In reality, Dylan was returning a favour. The collection also featured “House Of The Rising Sun,” a song that Dylan had covered on his 1962 self-titled CBS debut. The British blues band, The

Animals, scored a world wide # 1 with the song in the late summer of 1964. During the remainder of the sixties Jack recorded albums for Delmark, returned to Prestige, and signed with Reprise. For the latter imprint he recorded "**Young Brigham**" [1967] and "**Bull Durham Sacks & Railroad Tracks**" [1967]. Rounder Records issued an edited version of the foregoing discs as a single CD in 1995, while Collector's Choice issued an uncut version last year.

In late 1975 Elliott took part in Bob Dylan's mobile road show, the Rolling Thunder Revue [**ED. NOTE.** At the instigation of President Johnson, Operation Rolling Thunder had taken place between 1965-68 using B-52's to carpet bomb North Vietnam]. Accustomed to playing small clubs and bars, Jack was thrust in front of thousands of music fans at each show. The Revue also featured Bob Neuwirth [a Dylan acolyte and occasional recording artist], Roger McGuinn [ex-Byrds], T-Bone Burnett [who would form the Alpha Band with David Mansfield and Steven Soles when the Dylan tour ended] and Ronee Blakeley [occasional recording artist and female lead in Robert Altman's 1975 movie "**Nashville**"]. Apart from a couple of reissues, Jack's recording career stalled somewhat during the seventies. Acoustic singer/songwriters were no longer in vogue.

Elliott's "**Kerouac's Last Dream**" [1981] was only released in Europe on the German Folk Freak label, and became his only original musical contribution to the decade. If the legend can be believed, Kerouac and Elliott once spent three whole days ensconced in a Greenwich Village flat as, uninterrupted, the writer read the whole of his, then, unpublished work "**On The Road.**" Appleseed reissued the album in 1997 with additional tracks. At the end of the eighties, Fantasy issued the double album, "**Hard Travellin'**," a retread of Elliott's Prestige recordings from the early sixties.

During the nineteen-nineties Jack's revived his career and was nominated for three Grammys, finally picking up the 1995 Best Traditional Folk Album award for his Red House album "**South Coast.**" The renaissance began when Red House issued **Legends Of Folk,**" a collection that also featured Spider John Koerner and Utah Phillips [**ED. NOTE.** Circa 1959/60 it's claimed that Dylan and Koerner jammed in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota bars]. In the late nineties, Jack signed with Hightone Records. In 1998, accompanied by *guests*, Arlo Guthrie, Peter Rowan, Rosalie Sorrels, Tom Waits, Emmylou Harris, Nanci Griffith, John Prine, Jerry Jeff Walker, Guy Clark and Bob Weir he debuted for the label with the appropriately titled "**Friends Of Mine.**" A year later, and produced by the *other* Roy Rogers, Jack took "**The Long Ride.**" The support players on that set included label mates Dave Alvin [**ED. NOTE.** Alvin picked up the Y2K Best Traditional Folk Album Grammy for "**Public Domain**"] and Tom Russell, as well as Maria Muldaur, the late Dave Van Ronk and the harmonica of Norton Buffalo.

Tom Russell, Dave Alvin, Chris Smither and Ramblin' Jack Elliott took to the road in 1998 and toured the States as *Monsters of Folk*. The same year, Jack was in Washington D.C. to receive the prestigious National Medal Of Arts from President Clinton. During the late nineties, his daughter Aiyana co-produced and directed the documentary, "**The Ballad Of Ramblin' Jack.**" Premiered at the Y2K Sundance Film Festival it picked up the Artistic Achievement in Documentary Award. The film is now available on DVD and video. I think that it's true to say that Elliott is *the musical link* between Guthrie and Dylan. Of course that supposes that Dylan is *not an original* – a contentious supposition that I will not pursue further here. Narrated and scripted by his daughter, what comes to light during the 112-minute film is that the four times married Elliott's skills at parenting were minimal. The documentary includes home movies, old and new performance footage, as well as interviews with friends and family, and Elliott himself.

The beginning of the new millennium was tinged with a deal of personal sadness. Derroll Adam died in Antwerp, Belgium on Feb. 6th 2000, aged 75 years, while Jack's wife Jan Currie Elliott passed away on 25th March last year. Last Fall, Jack underwent hip replacement surgery and spent a number of months recuperating. Now a septuagenarian, during his career to date, Ramblin' Jack has recorded for nearly two dozen labels. What's certain is that like his inspiration Woody, Jack's star has never shone brighter than of late. A sign of the times - much of the back catalogue of this American treasure is back in print.

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