

# Dakota Dave Hull

## VOODOO KING OF THE ACOUSTIC GUITAR

By JEROME CLARK



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“**D**ave is a glassy-eyed caffeine junkie out of the howling wilderness of North (or is it South?) Dakota who happens to be one of the best guitarists in the world,” another Dave once intoned in that distinctive tongue known to linguists as Van Ronkish.

The first Dave, the subject of that oracular pronouncement, is one Dakota Dave Hull. He hails from Fargo, which is barely in North (not South) Dakota, butting up against the northward-flowing Red River which divides Fargo from its twin city Moorhead, in northwestern Minnesota on the far-eastern edge of the Great Plains. In truth, the “Dakota” part is mere biographical relic and colorful handle. He’s lived in another, more cosmopolitan twin-cities region – Minneapolis/St. Paul – since late 1969.

He is an internationally respected acoustic guitarist, praised by artists who, if more famous than he, have accepted him into their elite club: Norman Blake, Doc Watson, John Renbourn, Martin Carthy, Dave Swarbrick, John Hammond, Duck Baker, Eric Schoenberg and the late Dave “Snaker” Ray.

Folk-blues veteran Paul Geremia says, “He’s always been a great guitar player, with a well-rounded appreciation for all kinds of music. He could probably play with any kind of musician or group. I can’t think of any kind of American music he’s not familiar with – which is unusual in itself.”

That, however, is not the sum total of his notoriety. “If you didn’t know him,” ethnomusicologist, ballad singer and recording artist Tim Eriksen (late of Cordelia’s Dad) chuckles, “you might be surprised that someone with such a taste for loud shirts would play such tender music.” Eriksen refers to Dave’s appalling penchant for blinding Hawaiian shirts. He’s also the “Voodoo King of the Arabica Bean,” as Twin Cities guitarist Cam Waters crowns him, declaring that the coffee he roasts is “strong enough to make truckers dim their lights out of respect when they’re passing through Minneapolis.”

On a more serious note, Waters – with whom Dave composed the sprightly “No Such Thing As Too Much Garlic,” used as occasional musical filler on NPR’s *All Things Con-*



Dakota Dave and Doc Watson at Creation Audio in 1980 during the recording session for *Hull's Victory*.

**B**orn in Fargo on April 19, 1950, Dave is the son of Frank and Patricia Hull. His dad would become the Deputy Insurance Commissioner of North Dakota, while his mother taught clothing and textiles (a discipline once known as home economics) at North Dakota State University for nearly two decades. Though his mother played a little piano – “poorly,” Dave recalls – there wasn’t much music in the house. Neither his parents nor his three brothers afforded music much thought, but at age two little Dave was picking out tunes

on the keyboard. His parents saw to it that he got formal music lessons – in piano and clarinet – by the time he was five. “When I was 10, they got me a guitar,” he remembers, “and that was basically it for the piano and the clarinet.”

At summer camp he heard – in common with tens of thousands of his fellow young Americans in those days – guitar-strumming counselors who sat around the campfire peddling sugary, but vitamin-deficient confections out of the Kingston Trio/Highwaymen/Brothers Four/Limeliter’s fast-folk oven. Of course, that’s how it would look in retrospect. In the moment, Dave was enthralled, and soon he was haunting the record stores of Fargo-Moorhead seeking more.

Though I am not an acoustic-guitar master, nor – not to press the point – even a musician, I can lay some small claim to superior expertise: I have known Dave longer than any of the above-named. To wit:

In the mid-1960s, when I was a scrawny, clueless student at Moorhead State University fumbling into folk music via Johnny Cash, Flatt and Scruggs and Bob Dylan records, I was drawn to the Dickensian-monikered Bleak House, a refurbished old structure owned by nearby Concordia College. There you could drink coffee and listen to politely bohemian liberal-arts majors, most of them frankly terrible, warbling songs learned from records by people whose names I was hearing for the first time: Tom Rush, Ian and Sylvia, Judy Collins, Fred Neil.

One of the frankly terrible guitarists wasn’t even out of high school, but he was a ubiquitous presence, a wayfaring pilgrim from across the river, there as often as feet or family car would carry him. One pleasant spring evening we both happened to be out on Bleak House’s porch. Though we had never spoken before, we struck up a conversation. He told me his name was Dave Hull. As time went on, we became close friends, drawn together initially by a shared ferocious, insatiable curiosity about all things folk music. Forty years later, through thick and thin and all points between, we’re still good friends. Though today neither of us is scrawny or naïve, only one of us is a world-class guitarist.

He found his way slowly and uncertainly. He recalls that when he heard of “Travis picking,” he thought it must be a guitar technique pioneered by Travis Edmondson (of the nightclub-folk duo Bud and Travis). In 1965, while taking finger-picking lessons from local guitar teacher Chuck Durang, he was alerted to Pete Seeger and Tom Paxton. “I began to realize that this was something a lot bigger” than he’d thought, and as he embarked on a musical journey of exploration, among his first discoveries were the Folkways recordings of Dave Van Ronk. In later years the two Daves would become friends

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Dave, at the Coffeehouse Extemporé in Minneapolis, with Peter Ostroushko in 1974.





and mutual admirers. (Dakota Dave's guitar can be heard on Van Ronk's 1994 release *To All My Friends in Far-Flung Places*.)

"I remember the first time I heard Dylan," Dave says. "I couldn't believe anybody could sing like that. It was so far removed from any experience I'd had that I couldn't imagine what to make of it. I thought it was a joke. Not to mention the other people I was finding: Bill Monroe, Flatt and Scruggs, Blind Willie Johnson, and so on. But once that light bulb came on, when I was 17 or 18, it started to make sense to me. I remember that as almost like an epiphany. From there, it's been pretty much a continuous bumpy road looking for more music, playing more, listening more, widening my horizons."

By the time Dave moved across the river to Moorhead, he and I were hanging out pretty close to daily. He was working on his guitar playing and his record collection, and I was working on my record collection. Meantime, we listened to any live sounds that could be thought of, however precariously defined, as "folk music" as such passed through our remote provincial outpost. Pickings, literally and figuratively, were slim. Whatever slight toehold folk music – in the urban revival sense – had dug into Red River Valley clay, by the late 1960s it had been swept away, as everywhere else, by the tide of British invaders and psychedelic rockers. (I learned when I got smarter that there were actual folk musicians [for example fiddlers and accordionists preserving Scandinavian-immigrant dance tunes] around in our area at the time.)

One bitter winter evening we wandered over to the campus to hear somebody who had come through on the coffee-house circuit. The performer, a sunny-natured young Virginian who told great funny stories, but whose musical repertoire consisted of dorky soft-rock and country-pop hits, was – so Dave and I determined – talented, but shrouded in darkness, in urgent need of light from the worldly likes of us two.

After the concert we introduced ourselves, and the three of us spent the next few days drinking beer, smiling illegally, and listening to traditionalists like Doc Watson and the New Lost City Ramblers and folk-influenced singer-songwriters such as Paul Siebel and Townes Van Zandt. Our new friend's name, let us mention here, was Robin Williams. Later, he would meet Linda Hill and then marry her, and the two would carve out their own place on the musical landscape as mainstays of the folk and bluegrass world and as regu-



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The two Daves: Hull (l) and Van Ronk (r) in Kansas City, ca. 1989.

lars on Garrison Keillor's long-running public-radio variety show *A Prairie Home Companion*.

Meanwhile, Dave persuaded Robin to relocate to the Twin Cities in the early 1970s, and the two shared stages at folk venues there and elsewhere, with Dave playing second guitar behind Robin on the latter's road gigs. "Until Linda and I started playing together," Robin says, "Dave Hull was as close a musical partner as I've ever had. He was a roots-music sponge and a guitar player who always surprised me with the different directions he would head off into and the speed with which he became comfortable in a new genre."

The early-1960s Minneapolis folk revival was the one in which young Bobby Zimmerman from Hibbing played a passing role. It also produced what is surely the finest American revival folk band from that era, the blues rags 'n' hollers trio of Koerner, Ray, and Glover. That revival was set in Dinkytown. The second, nearly a decade later, found its home just across the Mississippi River on the West Bank, both within a stone's throw of the University of Minnesota. Headquarters consisted of the neighboring coffeehouses Extemporé and New Riverside Café.

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Group shot of the musicians on *Ace Pickin' and Sweet Harmony*, Dave and Sean Blackburn's first album. (Back row, l to r) Cal Hand, Bob Bovee, Sean, Becky Riemer, John Ashton and Peter Ostroushko; (Front row, l to r) Dakota Dave Hull, Curby Rule and Butch Thompson.

The “Dakota” got attached to “Dave Hull” without any conscious effort or thought on its owner’s part. According to Dave, “There was a guy named Zack who made the posters for the New Riverside. In 1970 a poster appeared with the ‘Dakota’ on it. It was his idea, but it was perfect, so I decided to keep it.”

At the Riverside the now-Dakota Dave met Peter Ostroushko, these days an esteemed composer and Red House recording artist, even then an ace of stringed instruments. For a time they were a duo. Robin recalls that they “had some killer arrangements of fiddle tunes with harmonies and modulations that left audiences stunned.” Dave also learned from revered senior figures, prominently Bill Hinkley and Judy Larson, then playing with the (still fondly remembered) jug band Sorry Muthas. The couple had been performing for years, and their knowledge of folk music was (and is) an object of wonder. “Bill has been a huge influence on my musical development,” Dave stresses, his voice cracking as he speaks of an ailing friend and mentor.

In 1972, the one and only Utah Phillips approached Dave and asked if he’d accompany him on a tour of England. Phillips’s “regular cohort, Saul Broudy, couldn’t make the trip for some reason,” Dave says. It proved to be a painful, if useful, experience. “I wasn’t ready for a trip like that, and in many ways it was a disaster, but I learned a hell of a lot about performance and timing from Phillips.” (Years later, after endless exposure to Dave’s laments about the youthful excesses that had so distressed and embarrassed Phillips, I ran into the man himself in a Chicago bar. With no prompting from me beyond a casual mention that I was a friend of Dakota Dave Hull, he brought up the subject. It turned out that all this time he had been blaming himself for the “disaster” that was the Phillips/Hull England tour. I would like to think that the two have since gotten it all sorted out in their own heads.)

Turned on to Western swing by a friend, traditional musician Bob Bovee, who presented him with an LP’s worth of classic cuts in 1975, Dave decided virtually on the spot to take his music in that direction. In short order he teamed up with another West Bank regular, guitarist and vocalist Sean Blackburn, whose tastes ran to swing, vintage pop and Hollywood-cowboy yodels. Hull and Blackburn ended up recording three albums: *Ace Pickin’ and Sweet Harmony* (Train on the Island, 1977), *North by Southwest* (Biscuit City, 1978), and *River of Swing* (Flying Fish, 1980). For a few years, Dave and Sean appeared with some frequency on *A Prairie Home Companion* before it was picked up for national broadcast and transformed into an American institution. The two went their separate ways – amicably – in 1984, with Sean eventually moving to Colorado, where he hooked up with singer Liz Masterson to perform old Western pop songs on the cowboy music circuit.

For his part, Dave – his singing voice the victim of a committed (if since-vanquished) unfiltered-cigarette habit – chose to concentrate entirely on instrumental performance. By the early 1980s, his reputation had spread far enough to attract the approving notice of no less than Doc Watson. Watson joined Dave on nearly half of the cuts on *Hull’s Victory* (Flying Fish, 1984), a flat-picking extravaganza packed with reworked fiddle tunes given rousing life by a splendid studio band comprising some of the Twin Cities’ top roots musicians: Blackburn, Ostroushko, Hinkley, the celebrated trad-jazz pianist Butch Thompson, and others.

His second Flying Fish recording, *Reunion Rag* (1991), is a sparer effort, with Dave’s guitar playing augmented here and there by trusted musical compadres Hinkley, Cam Waters and Eric Peltoniemi. Dave’s musical palate



is expanding here, with fiddle tunes and Western swing a relatively minor presence as he explores Tin Pan Alley (“When You’re Smiling”), Stephen Foster (“Hard Times,” not then quite the warhorse it would become), and his gorgeous in-the-tradition rags (the title tune, “Itasca Rag”). It is still probably my favorite of his recordings.

**F**lying Fish founder and president Bruce Kaplan’s untimely death in 1992 ended Dave’s association with that label. He started up his own Arabica imprint, after the Ethiopian-highland plant that produces superior coffee beans, a bow to what Dave cheerfully acknowledges as his “coffee snobbery,” and released *New Shirt*, an allusion to another of his obsessions. (For elucidation, see the album’s cover photo.) He was back to a band sound this time, throwing clarinet, trumpet, trombone and tuba with drums and percussion, into the mix, with tuneful originals and dusty rags and weepy waltzes alongside sturdy Appalachian folk melodies and New Orleans funeral marches.

By this time he had developed a serious taste for producing. In the early 1980s he had produced one of his heroes, the legendarily eccentric, brilliant Minneapolis folk singer Spider John Koerner, but in those folk-starved times couldn’t find a label that would get behind the result. Eventually the recording was picked up by the influential, St. Paul-based Red House Records, where Dave’s old friend and fellow Koerner-ophile Eric Peltoniemi now worked, and released under a title that perfectly expresses Koerner’s ozone humor: *Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Been*. Meantime, Dave was trying to figure out a way to finance, on his musician’s income, the construction of a studio in the basement of his south-Minneapolis home.

In 1995, he and Kari Larson, an amiable and immensely gifted young mandolin player, joined forces in a musical duo which lasted for six years and produced three superb CDs on Arabica. The recordings – *Double Cappuccino* (1997), *Moonbeams* (1998), and *The Goose Is Getting Fat* (1999) – document a musical odyssey that left, or anyway felt as if it were leaving, little of the world’s stringed sounds unheard and unreimagined as fleet and soulful guitar/mandolin (or guitar/guitar or guitar/uke) duets. The two got to show off a range of obscure guitars and guitar-like instruments from Dave’s archaic-instrument collection and deep knowledge of those instruments’ history. In 2000

Dave and Kari were chosen official endorsers of National Reso-Phonic Guitars.

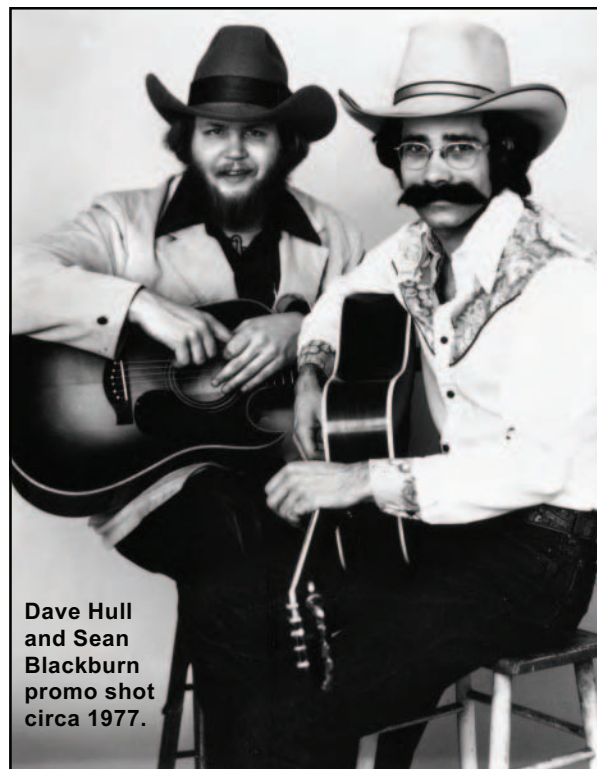
Dave recalls those years fondly: “I’ve never had the experience with another musician of where the feeling of music is exactly the same between us. We didn’t have to talk about arrangements, beginnings, endings – it was all natural, most of it unspoken. It was pretty cool. Absolutely the best thing I’ve ever been involved with musically.”

For his last two solo recording projects, Dave turned from flat-picking and returned to the finger-picking with which the journey had begun so long ago. The first of these was *Sheridan Square Rag* (2002), named after the residence of his recently deceased pal Van Ronk, for whom he had organized a benefit just weeks before the fabled New Yorker’s death from cancer on February 10, 2002. *Sheridan Square Rag* also takes Dave directly back to his roots in the American Folk Song Book: “Pastures of Plenty,” “Streets of Laredo/St. James Infirmary,” “Follow the Drinking Gourd,” and the like, along with a sprinkling of originals and an affecting reading of “Navy Hymn.”

His devotion to basic American folk remains strong, for all his explorations into other genres (jazz, classical, a dazzling spectrum of world sounds). He observes, “I’m a big fan of traditional music, ballads, blues, all of it, really. The words are a huge part of that tradition. If I’m playing a traditional song, I’m thinking about the words, the meaning of the song.” No slouch in that department himself, guitarist, songwriter, and trad-music maven Peltoniemi calls Dave “one of the most insightful artists in folk music.”

In 1999, Dave signed on as host of a weekly radio program on the community station KFAI-FM, Minneapolis/

St. Paul. He has since become the premier roots-music deejay in the Twin Cities. *The Dakota Dave Hull Show* (of which I am occasional co-host and sometime substitute when Dave’s out of town) airs for two hours on Thursday mornings (9-11 CST), its playlist an eclectic mix of old-time string bands, Anglo-Celtic ballads, early jazz, ragtime, bluegrass, Gospel, downhome blues, Cajun, Hawaiian, calypso, Brazilian, country, Western swing, rooted singer-songwriters – whatever is capturing Dave’s fancy and grabbing his ear at the moment. He also features occasional interviews with prominent international, national and local folk musicians. The show consistently ranks as one of KFAI’s most listened-to programs. You can hear it live at <[www.kfai.org/](http://www.kfai.org/)



**Dave Hull and Sean Blackburn  
promo shot  
circa 1977.**

Dave and Kari Larson in 1999.



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kfailive.htm> or archived at <[www.kfai.org/kfai2/audarch.htm](http://www.kfai.org/kfai2/audarch.htm)>.

In 2000, Dave managed to get his basement studio built. There he has created his two most recent recordings (the latter of which, after *Sheridan Square*, is 2004's *The Loyalty Waltz*). His lean, tasteful, toneful production style – not to mention the studio's magnificent acoustic atmosphere – is in abundant evidence on CDs by Twin Cities folk singers and guitarists, among them Cam Waters, Phil Heywood, Pop Wagner and Tim Eriksen. Eriksen says, "Dave's an excellent listener with a ton of experience and a relaxed vibe in the studio. He's been able to catch my music with a clarity I've found elusive at fancier places."

The above are all exceptional releases, but I think Peltoniemi's astonishing *Songs o' Sad Laughter* is a particular production – and over-all – triumph. The title song, not quite like anything I've ever heard, sounds to my hearing like a wedding of 16th-Century balladry and Wallace Stevens's poetry. One could make a case that Eric is the least-known major folk-based songwriter in America, and I'm pretty sure I'd hold that elevated assessment even if he and I didn't go back approximately a zillion years. Dave, who's known Eric as long as I have, thinks the same, and the combination of the two – Eric's singing

and compositional skills, Dave's arrangements and studio wizardry – amounts to a dream fulfilled for all concerned. Including me, 'cause I got to write the liner notes.

Meantime, the music keeps Dave in more or less constant motion. When not touring (this past spring in Ireland and England), he does local solo gigs and from time to time performs with Minnesota Guitar Wizards, in the heavyweight company of Peter Lang, Tim Sparks and Phil Heywood. Every year he hits the road on his way to the coasts, on each of which he has loyal fans.

He usually travels with three or four guitars: a 1935 Gibson Jumbo, a 2000 National Style I, a 1997 Charles Hoffman piccolo guitar, and sometimes a ca.-1930 Epiphone Recording E. He has a few other guitars at home for studio use. He eschews pickup systems and onboard electronics – a subject on which, to put it mildly, he is adamant – in favor of a good quality microphone. "Tone is everything," he insists. Lately, he's been using a GrooveTubes GT-44 tube mic on stage. In the studio he tends to employ the GT Model 1a, but when there's a U-67 available, he'll take that.

Dave sums up his philosophy thus:

"A lot of the players and singers out there these days don't spend enough time listening to the old masters. They listen to each other, and that's good, but that's not all there is. Musicians become rather ingrown that way. The old recordings are as close to the source as we can get. You don't have to study it. Just listen to it, listen a lot. It's the place to learn the rules of the game."

*Jerome Clark, an author and songwriter, lives with his wife, dog, two cats and thousands of CDs in a small Minnesota town (pop. 1,900) near the South Dakota border. His most recent book is Unnatural Phenomena (ABC-CLIO, 2005).*

## DISCOGRAPHY

**Hull's Victory**, 1984, Flying Fish #294  
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**Double Cappuccino**, 1997, Arabica #03  
**Moonbeams**, 1998, Arabica #04  
**The Goose is Getting Fat**, 1999, Arabica #05

### • w/Sean Blackburn:

**Ace Pickin' and Sweet Harmony**, 1977, Train on the Island #2  
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## CONTACTS

**BOOKINGS:** Arabica Productions, 2515 36th Avenue South, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 55406; Ph: 612-724-6995

**ON THE WEB:** <[www.dakotadavehull.com](http://www.dakotadavehull.com)>

