

# The Talkin' Blues of Ramblin' Jack Elliott

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BY PETER JONES

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Ramblin' Jack Elliott has a way with words... and then some.

"I do like to talk," the wandering folksinger confessed.

Elliott has spent much of his 78 years driving trucks and mobile homes, hitching rides and even jumping a freight train in his quest to see and sing for the world. Even so, his moniker famously refers to his conversational tendencies, not his inclination to travel.

The musician acquired his nickname in 1954 when he unexpectedly dropped by the home of folksinger Odetta (interviewed in this column in August 2002).

"Her mom noticed I talked a lot the first time I was there," Elliott recalled. "So when I knocked on the door, she saw who it was and called out, 'Odetta, Ramblin' Jack is here!' The name stuck."

Ask the verbose troubadour about his friend Bob Dylan and he will relay tales of ex-wives. Inquire about the decisions that shaped his distinctive life and he will tell you about an 80-year-old flat-bottomed boat he has recently restored.

"A friend of mine brought it out on a truck," Elliott said from his rented home in northern California. "He was coming out to visit so I didn't have to pay him for the gas. It's about 60 or 70 percent new wood now."

True to his reputation, Elliott takes many detours in his banter, but he eventually reaches his destination, even if it is a few minutes... or even a few hours later.

"When we finally completed that job and launched the boat, got in and rowed it around, it was the first time in my life that I felt that I had accomplished anything at all," he said. "It was great to see that dory in the water looking like a brand new boat."

Others may differ with the singer's assessment of his own accomplishments. Elliott has often been called the historical bridge between Woody Guthrie and Dylan. As folk music commercialized, Elliott, arguably to the detriment of his career, remained the vagabond American folksinger, an iconic image defined in the 20th Century by Guthrie, the singer's friend and mentor.

Elliott will bring his songs, stories and other diversions... in his truck... to the Swallow Hill Music Association May 1.

The singer, son of a respected Jewish surgeon, was born Elliott Adnopoz in New York City in 1931. He often rambles about his old Brooklyn neighborhood of colorful characters, an old whaler from New Bedford, Mass. and an Irish-American bull rider among them. Their romantic tales of a magical world outside Brooklyn would capture young Elliott's imagination. It was a cowboy from Long Island, of all places, who convinced the 15-year-old boy to follow his fanciful dreams.

"I heard a horse going by my house," Elliott said, making a rhythmic hoof sound on the roof of his mouth. "I jumped out of bed and looked out the window and it was a cowboy who looked like he was right out of a Will James novel. I jumped on my bicycle and rode alongside of him for about three miles interviewing him."

Elliott ran away from home and joined a traveling rodeo. A singing clown inspired the teen to learn guitar. His parents tracked down their wayfaring son a few months later.

When he hit legal age, Elliott was inevitably on the road again. In 1951, he met Guthrie. He traveled with him for four years and lived with the Guthrie family before the ravages of Huntington's chorea debilitated the legendary folksinger.

"He wasn't like any other performer I've ever met," Elliott said. "He acted as though he was some kind of fishing boat captain or something. I loved to listen to him tell stories. I could listen to him yarn by the hour. We played music almost every day."

Elliott eventually traveled to England, where he recorded some early albums. His uniquely American persona attracted roots-oriented Brits immersed in the 1950s skiffle fad, a British interpretation of American folk music.

Over the years, Elliott paid a price for his hapless travels and free-spirit lifestyle. Casualties included a more lucrative career, five marriages, and an often distant relationship with his daughter Aiyana, a filmmaker who in 2000 chronicled her father's exploits in an award-winning documentary, *The Ballad of Ramblin' Jack*.

"It was a little embarrassing," Elliott said of the film. "My cowboy friends hated the movie. They said, 'If I had a daughter like that, I'd take her across my knee and spank her.' She kept nagging me, 'Why weren't you there?' Her mother had run off with another man. They stole the Volkswagen bus and left me the dog. That was the best dog I ever had. He could drive a car. I didn't teach him to drive, of course. He learned from watching me."

Elliott's misadventures were immortalized in Kris Kristofferson's "The Pilgrim: Chapter 33." The song imagined the singer as a flawed but well-intentioned dreamer and a casualty of his own idealism, a "poet and picker" destined for a life of quick thrills and failed relationships.

He has tasted good and evil in your bedrooms and your bars,  
And he's traded in tomorrow for today,  
Runnin' from his devils, Lord, and reaching for the stars,  
And losin' all he loved along the way.

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Even today, Elliott cannot get away from his reputation as the drifter who never lived up to his promise, though his CD, *A Stranger Here*, recently won a Grammy for Best Traditional Blues Album.

A few years ago, the wife of musician Jerry Jeff Walker (interviewed in this column in July 2002) asked Elliott to lead a seminar at her music school. It was an attractive offer until she told Elliott what the subject of the discussion was to be.

***RAMBLIN' JACK ELLIOTT*** received his nickname because he loves to talk, not that he wasn't a vagabond as well.

"She wanted to know if I could lecture at the school and tell the students about what mistakes I made in my career," the musician said with some chagrin.

"I like what you said about 'well-intentioned,'" Elliott added. "Nobody's ever tied it up together so succinctly in a quick little sentence."

*Ramblin' Jack Elliott will perform May 1 at the Swallow Hill Music Association, 71 E. Yale. For more information, call 303-777-1003 or visit [swallowhill.org](http://swallowhill.org) or [ramblinjack.com](http://ramblinjack.com). Contact Peter Jones at This e-mail address is being protected from spambots. You need JavaScript enabled to view it .*

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