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# Good Times

On the heels of his 90th birthday, folk icon Ramblin' Jack Elliott comes to Moe's Alley

BY ADAM JOSEPH P18

## HIT THE ROAD, JACK





**DOUBLE BOOKED** *"We have to be careful about how many books he collects in his house," says Ramblin' Jack Elliott's daughter Qiyana Partland. "There are no limits to the subjects he is curious about; sometimes, you have to shovel out a path for him."* PHOTO CREDIT: DEBRA K. BROWNE

# RAMBLIN' ON

Ramblin' Jack Elliott is always up for an adventure; the faces and places change, but the roads still look the same **BY ADAM JOSEPH**

**F**olk hero Ramblin' Jack Elliott is one of the country's great storytellers. Still, his own story—a meandering tale of winding roads, chance encounters and lots of nautical-themed side streets—is the most intriguing of all. And Elliott's story isn't over. When he turned 90 on Aug. 1, there was a large backyard gathering to celebrate; Tom Waits, one of the countless singer-songwriters influenced by Elliott, attended. The birthday boy basked in the company of friends and loved ones, many of whom he hasn't been able to see in more than a year. In typical Ramblin' Jack fashion, he morphed emotion into humor.

"I was inviting people to my hundredth birthday," Elliott jests. "Three people accepted. I thought it was pretty amazing that three people were ready to come to my hundredth birthday in 10 years. Maybe I'll have to [celebrate] in five years if I don't make it past 95. Celebrating your hundredth birthday when you're 95 is kind of like a

showbiz trick. It's done with ropes. I'm studying up on my trick-roping. I've never been very good with my trip-roping. I'm good with knot tying, though. I worked as a rigger on sailing vessels. There are a lot of knots you have to use."

Recently, Elliott and a buddy took a 16-foot dory out on Tomales Bay in Marin County, about 30 miles north of San Francisco—maritime-related subjects regularly slip into Elliott's conversations.

"Sailboat rigging is almost like tuning a guitar," Elliott explains. "Each one of those strings has to be the right tension. Boating is a good way of relaxing from the stresses of performing. There's a lot of pressure, trying to stand on stage and entertain a bunch of people with strings and stories and songs. There's also an understanding and appreciation between the artist and the audience if they're paying attention and enjoying [the performance]. The same holds true when you're trying to make a boat go straight and keep her on course."

Other than boats and the landmark birthday celebration, everything came to a halt when Covid hit. Like every other musician, Elliott had to cancel shows and stay home. But the forced hiatus became an opportunity for him to reflect on his life while reconnecting with longtime friends.

"[Elliott] spent a fair amount of time with his friend and neighbor [the Grateful Dead's] Bob Weir," says Elliott's daughter, filmmaker Aiyana Partland. "He also saw quite a lot of his friends [actor] Peter Coyote and [bluegrass legend] Peter Rowan. We started making audio recordings, sort of like an oral history project done in conversation—sometimes with Peter Coyote, sometimes with Bob Weir and sometimes with Peter Rowan. That's been a great way for [Elliott], and maybe for all of them, to pass the time during the pandemic."

Partland stresses the importance of capturing her father's legacy and detailing his life and his impact on music and beyond.





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**RAMBLIN' ON**

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Partland's 2000 documentary, *The Ballad of Ramblin' Jack*, which earned a Special Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival, brought a new level of cultural attention to her father. The only other official work highlighting Elliott's legacy is Hank Reinke's *Ramblin' Jack Elliott: The Never-Ending Highway*—though it's comprehensive, many readers criticized Reinke's biography for failing to include an interview with the man himself.

"[Elliott] is falling through the cracks of history a little bit," Partland says. "I feel a tremendous weight to be doing more, like a Jack Elliott Archives or exhibit. Something needs to be created for the ages—we've got the Woody Guthrie Museum, and now the Bob Dylan Museum."

**STEAL SOMETHING GOOD**

Born Elliott Charles Adnopoz in 1931, Elliott was raised in Brooklyn by a loving family. Elliott's father was a respected doctor and surgeon who "spent a lot of time thinking about his patients' problems."

"I felt that seeing a doctor's life from the inside made me never want to be a doctor," Elliott says. "I just wanted to be a sailor, a cowboy or a truck driver—I've explored a bit of all three of those professions."

Elliott has spent most of the past 70 years sailing, restoring and learning everything he could about boats; he's driven 16-wheeler trucks across the country; worked on rodeos, doing everything from shoveling shit to roping to riding; and he performs 50-60 shows every year—reluctantly at times.

Elliott's rambling focus and various interests outside of music may help to explain the reason why he's never enjoyed the fortune and fame that so many who regard him as a musical genius and primary influence have had, such as Bob Dylan.

"There were a lot of people who tried to make me angry about that," Elliott told *Esquire* magazine. "[Dylan's] stealing the wind out of your sails,' they'd tell me, but I

still had plenty of wind left. And besides, I was flattered. Dylan learned from me the same way I learned from Woody [Guthrie]. Woody didn't teach me. He just said, 'If you want to learn something, just steal it—that's the way I learned from Lead Belly.'"

Elliott first heard Guthrie perform in 1950 on the Oscar Brand radio show. The honesty flowing throughout the tapestry of Guthrie's lyrics grabbed hold of Elliott and never let go. The 19-year-old Elliott managed to talk his way into the Guthrie household, where he would live for nearly two years, soaking up everything about Guthrie's music that he could. At the time, Guthrie's health had already begun to decline, so he welcomed the wide-eyed Elliott into his life—his family accepted Elliott; his curiosity and determination lifted Guthrie's spirit at a time when death loomed close.

From "Buffalo Skinners" to "1913 Massacre," Elliott mastered Guthrie's songbook in full—Guthrie once said that Elliott played his songs better than he ever did. Meanwhile, Elliott had developed his own fingerpicking style from watching pickers like Cisco Houston, Jessie Fowler and Bessie Smith. By the mid-1950s, word spread about an unknown "fast and furious" flat-picking folk musician seen hanging around Washington Square, New York City's go-to spot for folkies at the time. Elliott eventually moved out of the Guthrie house, but remained a constant in the family's lives.

"As 10-year-old kid, I was thrilled to see [Elliott] riding in on a motorcycle," recalls Woody's son Arlo. "I begged my mom to let Jack take me for a ride. She was naturally reluctant, but eventually gave in, and Jack took me for a ride on the back of his bike. It was the first time I'd ever been on a bike of any kind. It was thrilling and instilled in me a love for motorcycles that I've maintained for the rest of my life. It's funny how one little insignificant event can influence a life. Jack was primarily an influence



on me as a performer, a mentor, a family friend, and a million other things. But, of all of those things, the thing I remember most vividly was the ride we took together a long time ago.”

Without Woody Guthrie’s mentorship, there may have never been a Ramblin’ Jack Elliott; without Ramblin’ Jack Elliott, there might not have been a Bob Dylan.

“Coming from out there in Minnesota and suddenly finding himself in New York City must have been overwhelming for [Dylan] as a kid,” Elliott says. “He was 19 years old; that was the same age I was when I first met Woody 10 years before. I just got back from Europe and was visiting Woody at the hospital, and here’s Bob.” I think [Dylan] had four or five of my records on the Topic label. My very first record, which was orange-colored and eight inches in diameter, was called *Woody Guthrie’s Blues*. Bob said he had that record, and he liked a lot of the songs on it, so we became friends.”

Coincidentally, Elliott and Dylan both stayed at the Hotel Earle in Washington Square. Another up-and-coming Greenwich Village folk musician Peter La Farge lived on the same floor, just down the hall. Elliott says the joint became known as “the guitar player’s home away from home.”

“Those were interesting times and pretty exciting,” Elliott says. “Gerde’s Folk City was just a little neighborhood bar, and lots of the people who came there weren’t folk music fans; they were local drunks. Not a good audience. They didn’t tolerate anything that wasn’t top-notch. Even then, they were too busy drinking and talking to pay attention to some of the best performers who were brave enough to get on that stage: Cisco Houston, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Brother John Sellers, and me and Bob. We all served out apprenticeships on that rough little stage at Gerde’s on West Fourth Street. It wasn’t even the proper name of the street because it was two blocks east of Fifth Avenue. The same drunks drinking in that bar probably put the wrong street sign

up on that corner.”

While every set Elliott plays sounds like they are made up of songs that come directly from his heart, he only has four or five originals to his name—he did co-write some songs with Roy Rogers. However, one of Elliott’s rare originals, “912 Greens,” is considered by many to be one of the greatest folk songs you’ve never heard. Alongside his frantic yet crisp fingerpicking, Elliott talks through bourbon-soaked prose that paints a simple and visceral portrait of New Orleans: “*And a grey cat with three legs named Grey that used to lope along and fall down / ‘Cause Grey he had a stroke, couldn’t run too good on them three legs no how.*”

Elliott only sings the final two lines of the song: “*Did you ever, stand and shiver / ‘Just because you were, looking at a river.*”

Guy Clark told *American Songwriter* that he used “912 Greens” as an archetype for his now-famous “Let Him Roll.”

“I was trying to write that talking thing, which I got from Ramblin’ Jack,” Clark said. “Trying to re-create Jack’s approach to doing that kind of stuff, like ‘912 Greens,’ the best talking blues.”

Jackson Browne described “912 Greens” as a “time-traveling, spoken-word masterpiece.”

## ROAD WORK

Since his early years with Guthrie, Elliott’s life has been a continuous roundtable of some of the world’s most highly-regarded figures of literature, film, and of course, music. The folk musician is a natural magnet who attracts artistic genius. He may be known for rambling stories that sometimes last for hours, but he’s also a perceptive listener, as well as an active and thoughtful observer who’s both genuine and generous.

Also, there aren’t many singers who can hold a note for as long as Elliott or say they’ve yodeled to a packed house at Madison Square Garden.

Before one of Elliott’s many Newport Folk Festival performances, he noticed that a



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## RAMBLIN' ON

*“Sailboat rigging is almost like tuning a guitar. Each one of those strings has to be the right tension. Boating is a good way of relaxing from the stresses of performing. There’s a lot of pressure, trying to stand on stage and entertain a bunch of people with strings and stories and songs.”* —RAMBLIN' JACK ELLIOTT

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fellow musician on the bill, who also happened to be a significant influence, Mississippi John Hurt, had a junky old guitar. Before Hurt took the stage, Elliott insisted he borrow his Martin. Hurt jumped at the offer and was forever grateful.

After meeting then-unknown writer Jack Kerouac in 1953, Elliott and his girlfriend at the time were invited to his apartment to listen to him read the book he had just finished, *On the Road*. It took three days and three large bottles of wine—along with some other substances—for Kerouac to get through the transcript. The Beat classic wouldn't be published for another four years.

“He had this quiet strength about him,” Elliott says of Kerouac.

The same can be said about Elliott.

“On stage, he [Elliott] sings folk songs, but at the same time, he’s talking from a pretty personal place,” Partland says. “He can be pretty intimate with an audience.”

Elliott says he no longer performs Tim Hardin’s “If I Were a Carpenter,” but the tune was a longstanding show finale for many years. And, of course, he has an accompanying anecdote.

“I did [“If I Were a Carpenter”] sort of like a circus trick to end the show,” Elliott begins. “I would leap off the stage, strumming the guitar and walk up and down the aisles or around the tables. [The audience] would become really charged by the proximity, the closeup deal. In one such moment, I jumped off

the stage and was serenading the crowd individually. When I got to the rear of the room, there was my friend, an actor, Dennis Hopper. He was wearing some kind of a Spanish Fandango hat with a flat brim and a flat top, and he beckoned me to sit down with him. He said, ‘Jack, I’ve got a part for you in a movie. It’s the lead. It’s a cowboy.’

“He handed me a token script to take home and read and then gave me a screen test. The movie was called *The Last Movie*, and it was going to be filmed in Mexico. But my daughter was born a week before that. I enjoyed reading the script, and I did the screen test, but then I realized that I didn’t want to go to Mexico with a new baby—I was afraid that she might get sick, so I told Dennis, ‘I’m sorry, but I can’t accept this job.’ So, Dennis played the role himself, and Kris Kristofferson was in the movie. I think they ended up filming it in Peru.”

After mentioning Kris Kristofferson, Elliott smoothly transitions to a related topic.

“I think I was the second person to record [“Me and Bobby McGee”] after Kris [Kristofferson],” Elliott says. “He’s been a very strong booster of my spirits. Janis [Joplin] was the third, I think. I met Janis at Newport [Folk Festival] and danced with her, and she shared her bottle of Southern Comfort with me. She was a great singer. Marvelous!”

The conversation moves to the subject of boats, as it usually



does, and Elliott's first trip to San Francisco.

"I discovered that the Schooner Vandenberg was [in Sausalito], so I met the people who lived on board, Gwen Tompkins and her son the Commodore," Elliott says. "Her husband was the skipper of the boat when they sailed around Cape Horn in 1936—the Commodore was four years old at the time. Must have been a great trip through 60-foot waves. I read the book, and now here I was. I asked if it would be alright to have a look at the schooner. 'Come on board at 7pm and have dinner with my mom and me,' he said. I told them my name was Buck Elliott, which was the name I was using. I knocked on the hull, and they came out of the accommodation onto the deck, and the Commodore introduced me to his mother: 'This is Jack Elliott.' I didn't want to embarrass him by correcting him in front of his mom, so I said, 'Okay, I'll be Jack for a while.' And the name stuck. It's as simple as that."

The "Ramblin'" moniker came later. "I was fascinated with Model A Fords," Elliott says. "I had just bought one for \$15. Took me 10 days to get it running. I was telling [activist/folk musician] Odetta about resuscitating this old rusty Model A Ford. Her mother was listening and must have thought that was kind of weird because one day, I visited and overheard Odetta's mother say, 'That Jack Elliott, he sure can ramble.' That's when I became Ramblin' Jack."

## NO STRANGER

After nearly 60 LPs, reissues, rare 78s, EPs, 45s, contributions, compilations, soundtracks, festival recordings and guest appearances, the name Ramblin' Jack began to pick up more mainstream notoriety in the '90s. Elliott received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Folk Alliance and a National Medal of Arts from President Bill Clinton in 1998. In 1995, he scored his first Grammy for Best Traditional Folk Album for *South Coast*; in 2009, he won the Best Traditional Blues Album Grammy for *A Stranger*

*Here*—he has an additional three nominations to add to the list.

"Well, I was a good guitar player for a while," he says. "I had a little stroke about two years ago, and I lost a lot of ability in my left hand, you know, playing chords going up and down the neck, fingering and all that. But I'm working on it. I may have to take some guitar lessons. I still enjoy trying to play guitar, but it's not as easy as it used to be."

I'm far more interested in boat-building, actually. You know, the construction of a guitar is like building a ship model."

Aside from "going from one doctor's appointment to another," Elliott hasn't been doing a lot of rambling—meaning traveling, in this case—lately.

"I've got two memory cells left, and one of them is swollen, and the other one is leaking," he says with a laugh. "I can't remember what I did five minutes ago."

Elliott is still a dedicated troubadour. On Sept. 17, he heads out on his first tour in over a year. After a show at Moe's Alley in Santa Cruz on Sept. 23, Elliott heads down to Big Sur to play Fernwood Resort on Sept. 25 and the Henry Miller Library on Sept. 26. Then, he'll be in Texas, Missouri and Illinois through late November.

When asked if he has any regrets, Elliott pauses for a couple of minutes.

"Well, I regret that I never sailed around Cape Horn when I was young enough to do it," he answers before leading into a joke about Maine—Elliott lived in Maine for about a year following his father's 1984 death.

"Have you heard this one?" he begins. "There was a tourist lost in a little town in Maine. He drives up to a house, and a man sits on the porch on a rocking chair. The driver rolls the window down and says, 'Can I take this road to Portland?' The man in the rocking chair thinks for a minute, and then he says, 'You can, but they've got one there already.'"

*Ramblin' Jack Elliott with special guests Dirk Powell and Rainy Eyes perform at 7pm on Thursday, Sept. 23 at Moe's Alley, 1535 Commercial Way, Santa Cruz, \$35-40. folkyeah.com.*

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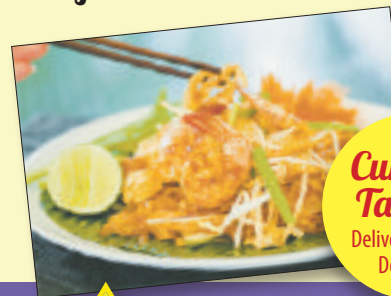
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