

CULTURE
MUSIC

The Bodhisattva Blues

Bluesman Reverend Freakchild discusses his music, sobriety, and why he's pursuing a master's degree in Buddhist studies.

By Jeff Goldberg | NOV 12, 2019



Reverend Freakchild | Photo by Evan Fairbanks

With his raspy baritone and soulful guitar-playing, Reverend Freakchild has long-since earned his “PhD in Blues Bardology,” as one music critic put it. But, more recently, the 47-year-old bluesman also has been pursuing a Master of Divinity degree in Buddhist studies at the Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado.

“I joke with people that I’m making the most of my midlife crisis,” laughs Reverend Freakchild, aka Fordham Murdy, for whom singing blues and Buddhist practice have become part of the same spiritual journey ever since a chance meeting with the Zen teacher Bernie Glassman in 2012. On albums like his latest *Dial It In*, Reverend Freakchild combines traditional blues with original songs that often reflect Buddhist teachings.

Back at his home in Boulder after a busy summer on the road, we talked about his life and how he gives the blues a uniquely Buddhist beat.

Do you think of yourself as a Buddhist bluesman? Yeah, man. I play the blues and practice and study the dharma. There’s so much about the sources of sorrow and human suffering in both.

Is that where you see the connection? The first noble truth is *dukkha*, suffering. The blues are about that kind of suffering. The constant dissatisfaction with life because we desire fame or money or love and we’re either not getting what we want, getting it and then losing it, or getting it and realizing it’s a drag. Which is the second noble truth, man—the cause of suffering—craving and clinging to things that are impermanent. The third noble truth is the end of suffering, and singing the blues can ease the suffering, not because you’re getting rid of it, but because you’re looking at it and letting it go.

So, can singing the blues be a path out of suffering? Maybe. In Buddhism, the path that leads to the end of suffering is the dharma. For a lot of the old blues singers the answer was to get another woman, some more booze and, “*Hey, everything gonna be alright!*” What I do is more like preachin’ blues.

What do you mean by preachin’ blues? There were many early blues musicians, like Reverend Gary Davis and Son House, who were either preachers who became bluesmen or bluesmen who became preachers. For them, there wasn’t much of a line between Saturday night and Sunday morning. I draw on their music a lot.

You just got back from Seattle. What were you doing there? I was at a conference called the [Buddhist Recovery Summit](#). It’s a Buddhist-based recovery group like AA for people interested in the dharma who are also recovering from alcoholism or substance abuse. I got sober 13 years ago, and I’ve been sober ever since. AA meetings are still part of my daily practice, along with meditation, studying the dharma, and playing music. The fifth precept says to refrain from intoxicants, and AA can help me do that.

Sounds like your life was once all about sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll. Oh yeah. I moved to New York after college. I was playing gigs around the city, drugging, drinking, had a rich girlfriend with a nice apartment. For a while it was groovy, but then the lifestyle took over. I was smoking pot all the time and when I drank I really got crazy. My life was on fire. My bottom was really bad.

How bad was it? One night, I went to a club and started drinking vodkas. I lost count after seven. I ended up pulling the fire alarm, stumbling home to my girlfriend’s apartment, and waking up naked and handcuffed with a bunch of cops standing around me. I’d turned on the shower and passed out while it was running. There was a half inch of water on the floor of the apartment, and the downstairs neighbors had called the cops because it was leaking through their ceiling.

What happened after the cops took you away? I ended up spending a couple of weeks in the psych unit at Cabrini Medical Center. Compared to the patients there, I realized I wasn’t crazy. If I stayed off drugs and drink, I was actually pretty normal. I went to my first AA meeting in the hospital and kept going after I got out. In retrospect, I was very fortunate. I gained a visceral understanding that the cause of my own suffering was mostly me.

When did you start getting serious about Buddhist practice? AA meetings alone started to feel like they weren’t enough, and I began to get interested, first in yoga and then in other Eastern practices. I checked out the Peace Education Summit that was being held in 2012 in Newark, New Jersey, and attended a breakout session where [the Zen teacher] Bernie Glassman was talking. A woman in the audience starts complaining “I can’t meditate, blah blah blah…” and Bernie shouts at her, “Hey! You’re making it worse.” It totally calmed her. I didn’t know who Bernie Glassman was at the time, but I was impressed. A few months later, I found out he was leading a pilgrimage to the Buddhist holy sites and decided to go. That was an eye-opener.

How so? We followed in the footsteps of the [Buddha](#)—from Lumbini, where he was born, in the foothills of the Himalayas in Nepal; to the Mahabodhi Temple in Bihar, India, where he was enlightened; to Sarnath, where he first taught; and finally to Kusinagara, where he died. I took refuge in the Jetta Grove, where he taught in the rainy season. When I got home, it was like reverse culture shock. Instead of feeling out of place while we were there, I felt out of place when I got back to New York. I couldn’t keep doing things the way I’d been doing them.

So, what changed? I turned off my cable and stopped watching television, I started seriously doing sitting meditation. And about a year and a half after the pilgrimage, I was going to Colorado for a gig, and a friend suggested that I visit Naropa, which I did. I felt so comfortable here, like I was wearing the right clothes. I made an appointment with the admissions people—and here I am.

Do you practice in a particular lineage? I’ve trained in many meditation methods—*shamatha* [calm abiding], *vipassana* [insight], *Madhyamaka*, *tonglen* [sending and receiving], you name it—but I don’t practice in any one lineage. I’m more like Groucho Marx, who said he’d never join a club that would have him as a member.

At the same time that you’re studying at Naropa, you’re also on the road playing music. How do you manage that? We have classes in the spring and fall, and I go on the road in the summer. It’s like how the Buddha would spend the rainy season in Jetta Gove, and then take off on his wanderings. My way of doing it is to travel around the States playing gigs and talking on radio shows.

How do you integrate Buddhism into your music? I sing some of those old gospel blues songs, but I add some dharma to them. Like, I’ll sing this Reverend Gary Davis song *It’s Gonna Be Alright* as a kind of *metta* [lovingkindness] prayer. I have everyone sing the chorus and say, sing it out to your loved ones, sing it out to your teachers, to the difficult people in your life, to your enemies, across the ocean, across the universe. I also do some of my own songs that have Buddhist themes.

What’s an example of a Buddhist theme in your songs? I wrote *Hippie Bluesman Blues* after all my stuff got stolen one night—two guitars, a ukulele, my merch, the gig bag with \$400 in it. I’d done my laundry the night before, and they even took my clean clothes. It was brutal, and I was angry, but you have to let that stuff go. That’s what the song is about: “*Ain’t no problems, only solutions / think I’m gonna join the revolution.*” The lyrics borrow from [11th-century Bengali Buddhist master] Atisha’s *lojong* [mind training] teachings about bringing obstacles onto the path of awakening. *Dial It In* talks about: “Now, can we go beyond / what we think of as right and wrong / like loss and gain / pleasure and pain / praise and blame / and obscurity and fame.” It’s about letting go of the [eight worldly concerns](#) and embracing the [four immeasurables](#).

Where did your Reverend Freakchild persona originate? It started before I got sober. I was sitting on the couch one day getting high and this friend of mine came into the room and said, “Man, you’re just like some kind of lonely freakchild, sitting around all day smoking pot.” I did a four-song demo of some old blues tunes called *Lonely Freakchild*. But the name evolved into Reverend Freakchild as I got more into Reverend Gary Davis and some of the blues preachers. Eventually, I had a regular gig as Reverend Freakchild at a club called Tobacco Road in New York. I even sent away to the Universal Life Church, and they sent me a certificate saying Reverend Freakchild was an ordained minister. It started as a joke, but it’s gotten more real now.

You’re into the songs of [11th-century Tibetan yogi] Milarepa. He was a pretty badass dude, a reformed murderer. That’s right. After his father died, his uncle was abusive to him and his family, so he studied with a sorcerer and cast a spell that destroyed the whole town. Then he spent the second part of his life making amends, meditating in the mountains and only eating nettles. He ate so many nettles his skin turned green.

What were his songs about? They were poems about his daily experiences on the path to realization. They’re sometimes called *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*. That dude had one big catalogue, man!

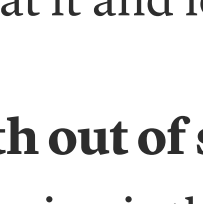
Did Milarepa actually sing his songs? No one knows for sure. But there are certainly Buddhist musical traditions. According to Khenpo Tsültrim Gyamtso’s book *The Stars of Wisdom*, Buddha encouraged the early monks to sing the sutras in melodies borrowed from the popular songs of the day. That’s kind of what I do, too.

What’s your favorite Milarepa lyric? It’s a simple one, and I’ve programmed it to be the daily reminder on my phone when I wake up. It just says, “Watch your mind day and night. Watch your mind day and night.” It reminds me that thoughts and feelings come and go like the clouds in the sky. If I just watch my mind, I can gain a deeper appreciation for how strange and precious human experience is—and make the most of it.



Further reading: If you enjoyed this article, you may also be interested in Jeff Goldberg’s interview with jazz musician [Mark Turner](#), an interview with the composer of an [opera about the life of Milarepa](#), or [Tricycle’s Buddhist music playlist](#).

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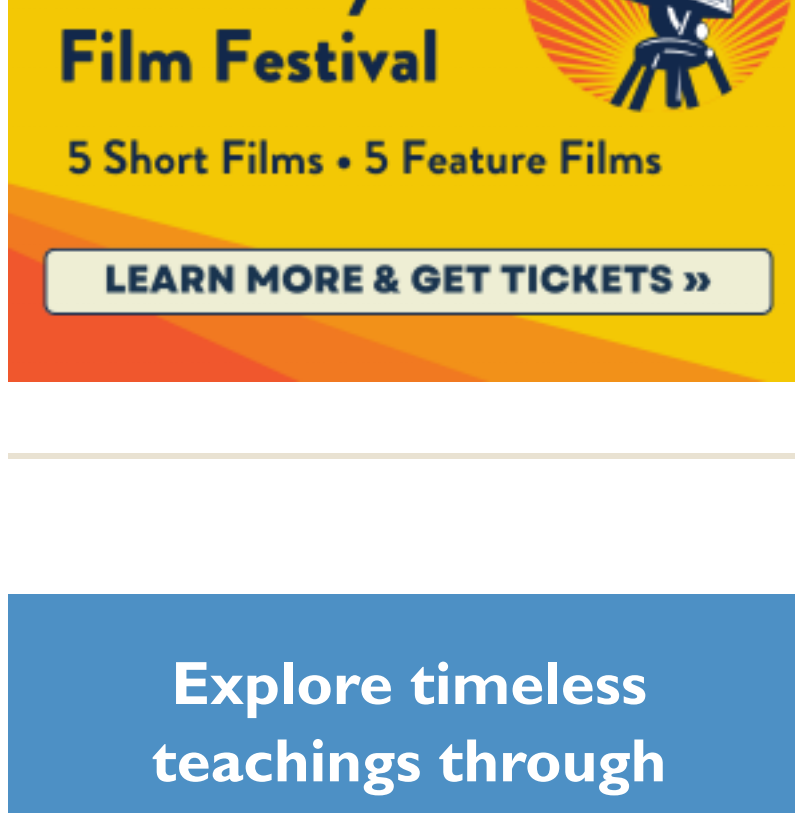


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Jeff Goldberg is the author of *Anatomy of a Scientific Discovery* (Skyhorse Publishing), a book about the race to discover endorphins. He has been studying Buddhism and practicing dharma for 10 years.

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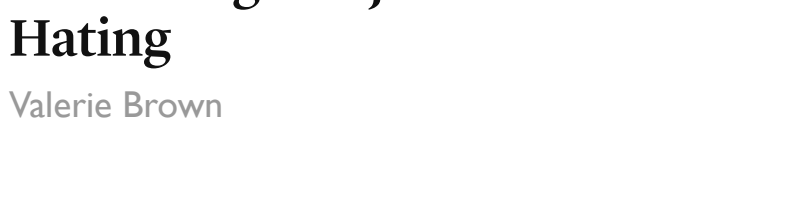


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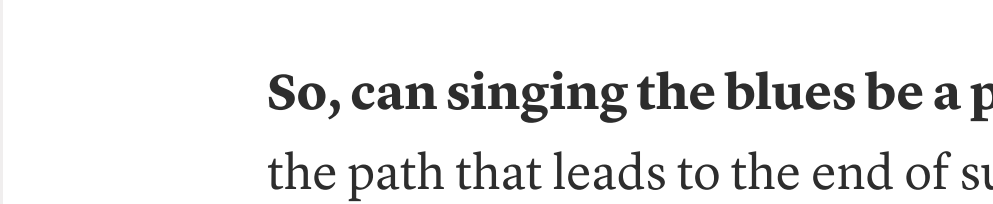
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