

Eric Von Schmidt: Famous For a Song He Didn't Write

By LARRY JAFFEE

Folk music is traditionally handed down from generation to generation. Sometimes the true authorship of the tune gets meddled in the process, as new players add their own licks and tricks so that something entirely different comes out.

Witness the strange case of "Baby Let Me Follow You Down," a song that Bob Dylan included on his debut album on Columbia Records. Von Schmidt, now 61 years old, shared all the messy, convoluted details with SongTalk in a phone conversation from his Connecticut home.

While Von Schmidt still plays music (in the spring of 1992 he toured Italy with his partner, Linda Clifford), he primarily makes his living through writing children's and history books and painting.

Dylan came to Von Schmidt's home one evening in 1960 to jam, when Eric performed for him a version of "Baby Let Me Lay It On You," which he thought was "a Blind Boy Fuller song that I had learned from another white guy, Geno Foreman."

The song later ended up on Dylan's debut album as "Baby Let Me Follow You Down." The chords Dylan used on the song, Von Schmidt also believed, came from a Dave Van Ronk song. "The way I played it was as close as I could get to Geno Foreman's version, which I assumed was Blind Boy Fuller, but I never heard him play this thing."

In any case, what Dylan ended up playing on the album "was not what he heard from me," Von Schmidt noted. "There is a long history to who indeed wrote this song and who has what part of the copyright," he adds.

Von Schmidt pointed out that listeners often misunderstand Dylan's spoken introduction. "What Dylan said is not that 'I learned this song from Eric Von Schmidt,' it's that he 'first heard' it from me. But that was confusing enough to the

Columbia people when they made the record. They indeed listed me (in 1962) as the author on the record's stamp, which is about as close you can get if you are going to launch a lawsuit," he laughed.

"What finally brought the whole thing to some kind of completion when [film director Martin] Scorsese did *The Last Waltz*, in which Dylan performed 'Baby Let Me Follow You Down.'" So for the first time, somebody had to decide who in the hell has the copyright on this goddamned thing. They didn't care who; they wanted a name on a piece of paper.

"What finally happened was that Manny Greenhill, who had been my manager back in the folkie days, also managed Gary Davis. He sat Gary down and asked, 'What songs did you write?' Aside from the 'Star Spangled Banner' and maybe 'Moonlight Becomes You,' it was every song that anybody heard of, Gary Davis wrote. One of them as 'Baby Let Me Lay It On You.'"

Von Schmidt thinks there may be some justification to Davis' contention because Davis and Fuller were both from Durham, NC. "Blind Boy Fuller probably learned more from Gary than the other way around. I don't know. Gary was just making that change-over from singing strictly spiritual. It was just one of those things [that could be cleared up if] Gary was still alive so he could say, 'Yeah, I wrote that.'"

Von Schmidt once heard Davis play the song, and it was close enough for him to believe that he was its author.

Although Von Schmidt's name currently appears to this date as the author of "Baby Let Me Follow You Down" on Dylan's CDs for his first album and the *Biograph* box set, Von Schmidt has never received any royalties, despite the recognition.

After Dylan's second album, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* became a hit in 1963, Columbia wrote a letter to Von Schmidt, informing him that from that time on, Dylan and he would share the composition of "Baby Let Me Follow You Down."

"So I wrote back, 'If indeed Dylan and I are co-authors of this thing, why are you starting to pay me now, instead of when the record first came out?' But in my letter back, I was scrupulously honest, where I heard the song, that I thought it was a Blind Boy Fuller song, that I changed it a little bit, and Dylan had changed it a little bit.

"I got this wonderful letter back [from Columbia], I think the woman's name was Smokey, that said: 'You're quite right Eric, you have no rights to this song.'" Von Schmidt bellowed. "They didn't know who did have rights to it, but they knew I didn't have rights to it. That was that. I never got a dime."

But Von Schmidt doesn't hold any hard feelings towards Dylan, who he calls the "best P.R. man I ever had." "Sometimes I think I'd like to learn his version of it."

Von Schmidt still plays it his way. ■



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