

## Tribute to David Bromberg

Parker Gambino December 10, 2025

By the time David Bromberg's first (self-titled) album was released in 1972 (or 1971) he was one of the most in-demand session musicians in New York's Greenwich Village folk etc. scene. Originally a student at Columbia University intending to major in musicology, he dropped out after a few semesters to pursue his passion 6 miles to the south. An early formative experience was his lessons taught by Reverend Gary Davis, not only in guitar technique, but also in stage presence, as Bromberg would guide the blind Reverend to services at black churches, where the preaching sensibilities that he was exposed to would leave a strong trace. His reputation gradually grew as he played around during the 1960's in what he referred to as "basket houses": the clubs where performers would play their song or read their poem, after which a basket was passed to collect tips. His musical associates from those days reads like a "who's who" of revival Americana and the burgeoning singer-songwriter scene that was to re-shape pop music.

By 1970 Bromberg was an all-around roots virtuoso stringster, the go-to guy for guitar accompaniment. At the 1970 Isle of Wight Festival, he was backing up folk-singer Rosalie Sorrels. The festival that year was notorious for the rowdy savages crashing the gate *en masse* to strip away the veneer of civilization. The crowd gave many worthy performers a rough time, including Sorrels. She asked Bromberg to play a song on his own, and his rendition of "Bullfrog Blues" went over well, calming the masses sufficiently for Sorrels to finish her set. The promoters, observing the crowd's positive response to Bromberg, asked him to return at 6 PM to perform an entire set on his own. The rowdies were equally on board with Bromberg's full set, as witnessed by representatives of Columbia Records, leading eventually to a recording contract offer.

The first, self-titled record consisted of originals and reworkings of a few traditional chestnuts. It also marked a significant expansion of Bromberg's bag of tricks, crossing him over the threshold from being a sideman/accompanist to being the front-and-center vocalist. He had plenty of established buddies to call on to fill the roster for his recording combo (including the prolific David Amram, subject of the poster of May 2024). While he had a couple of top-shelf contributors, he did not list them among the personnel, preferring to have his work evaluated on its own merits. Those two were Bob Dylan (on harmonica) and George Harrison (guitar and co-writer of the song "Holdup").

From there Bromberg's career exploded as he followed his musical omnivory (playing even with Ravi Shankar), cranking out albums and assembling a touring band that grew by accretion to eventually include three horns and three female vocalists in addition to the usual suspects. With his versatile simpatico sidemen, the repertoire included blues, folk, Irish fiddle tunes, bluegrass, and old-timey New Orleans jazz. In the 1970's there were few comparable roots/Americana touring enterprises of the size of the David Bromberg Big Band. He described his albums, which usually included a little bit of everything in a mashed-together genre-fest as "commercial suicide"; record stores never knew which bin to put the albums in.

No two David Bromberg band gigs were ever alike. Each one evolved in real time without a planned set list, with Bromberg making it up as they went along, calling out whatever he felt like playing at any given moment. He commanded the stage, with humor-laden spoken introductions to songs, as well as random tangents to suit his whim. This is where his exposure to the stylings of sermons and music in the black churches paid off big; Bromberg was a master at holding an audience, pacing his show to keep the congregation attentive for the full duration of his ride.

Just as the the band repertoire was highly varied, so was Bromberg's singing style. Many reviews of his music prefer to focus on the indisputable instrumental virtuosity and arranging, while grudgingly giving a pass to his idiosyncratic vocals, treating them as something to be endured for the sake of the string-stroking. Point well taken. Although he could be smooth and melodious when keeping it soft, things got out of hand when the preacher took over, with abruptly shifting dynamics, and a distinctive vibrato-inflected nasal bleat. My rationalization is that this might to some degree be true to the original source material, and it is always a manifestation of not-to-be-prettied-up unadulterated feeling, Bromberg's ultimate objective. Also to be kept in mind is the saturating essence of wry humorous intent throughout the doings, well-served by the vocal eccentricities.

Some chronological career timeline uncertainties spring up in various accounts and interviews (including the release date of his first album, mentioned in the first sentence). What is clear is that by 1980, Bromberg's big band touring had him burned out. He turned most of his attention to violins, becoming a builder, a trader, and even moreso, a collector. He specialized in American-made instruments, amassing the largest-ever collection of American-made violins. Bromberg took a 20-or-so year sabbatical from performing, although the existence of some performance tapes from 1982 show that his abstinence was not absolute. He followed his violin obsession through to the extent of opening a shop (around 2003) in Wilmington, Delaware, where, as the designated cultural ambassador for the city, his civic contributions included benefit performances in support of restoration of a historic theatre, and leading jam sessions there once it had opened.

Bromberg got bitten by the performance bug in the 21st century, and for a while divided his attention between the violin shop and his guitar activities. He eventually got the band back together again and romped his way through a few albums (starting in 2007) and tours, finishing up with a big band tour in support of his most recent (final?) album, *Big Road*. The farewell concert took place in 2023.

David Bromberg always did things pretty much the way he wanted to. As of this writing there are no tour dates listed on his official web site, but there is the option to request a show, so his performing schedule these days seems to be limited to filling requests if he feels like it!

I sketched Bromberg in the context of a small supporting band *sans* horns or female backup vocalists. The venue was New York City's Madison Square Park (the famed Flatiron Building, across the street, has been added to the background of the sketch). The park is among my favorite venues; an early arrival guarantees prime location (I do not recall seats being part of the deal), and there is easy post-concert access to the performers. To me, Bromberg's signature seems a total analogue of his singing style.

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## Recommended Links

David Bromberg website: <https://davidbromberg.net/>

There is a documentary entitled "Unsung Treasure" available on Amazon Prime video, and other platforms, not on the web, though.

There are abundant performance videos on YouTube!  
Start here with the 2011 Philadelphia Folk Festival, singing out Levon Helm (Howard Johnson on tuba, David Amram on horn and pennywhistle): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yxzhyWorXKs>

Then click away forever with the YouTube Bromberg algorithm.

2014 Open-Mic Interview at Library of Congress Folklife Center:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a08LokhvK\\_4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a08LokhvK_4)

2012 Interview, Holger Petersen/CBC  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=981qhNg9ZJI&t=980s>

2013 Interview, Johnathan Clarke/Out Of The Box  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q57giD698RA>

2023 Interview, Mitch Gallagher/Cutting Room/Sweetwater  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=62\\_lpEsEhQ8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=62_lpEsEhQ8)