

"I'm a pretty confidential item on the radio," admits **David Frishberg**, "and also out in the real world." But the pianist-singer is no stranger to connoisseurs of literate songwriting. Finely tuned melodies and carefully crafted lyrics are the hallmarks of Frishberg's style, which takes its own idiosyncratic twists and turns in the tradition of Frank Loesser, Yip Harburg, Johnny Mercer, and other masters of the popular song. From his first songs in the early 1960s, such as "I'm Hip" and "Peel Me a Grape," through such oft-requested gems as "My Attorney Bernie," "The Sports Page," and "Sweet Kentucky Ham," and such new additions as "The Green Hills of Earth," Frishberg has established his unique place in a particularly American vernacular idiom that boasts all too few contemporary practitioners.

"You can write songs for records," Frishberg notes, "or a production number for a television show, or a comedy number for a stage presentation—each process has its own different set of values. Then there's the pure song that's written just for the melody and the lyrics, for someone to sing. And if there are records made of it, that's kind of gravy. But there are so few of those. Most of the songs being written today, I think, are being written for records."

Frishberg's songs, with their always clever, sometimes wistful observations of life present and past, turn up on records and in the repertoires of Blossom Dearie, Al Jarreau, Susannah McCorkle, Mel Tormé, Cleo Laine, Jackie Cain and Roy Kral, and others. But they are perhaps best revealed when he sings them himself before a club or concert audience. So, as with his previous Fantasy recording, *Live at Vine Street*, Frishberg's newest collection, *Can't Take You Nowhere*, was recorded live, at San Francisco's Great American Music Hall. "I think my songs go over better that way," Frishberg observes. "I perform better when I'm in front of people who are responding and I prefer the excitement and feedback of the live recording."

Frishberg was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1933, the youngest of four children. His older brothers, Mort, a "boogie-woogie freak," and Arnold, initiated him into jazz with their collections of 78s. Dave was enthralled by such pianists as Pete Johnson, Jay McShann and Albert Ammons, Frankie Carle, Teddy Wilson, and Count Basie. While at the movies, he fell sway to the performing panache of Chico Marx. "I just loved the way he approached it," Frishberg says. Music came to rival young Dave's passion for baseball (which persists in the form of an extensive collection of books and memorabilia, and inspired musical listing of old players' names in his "Van Lingle Mungo").

By the time he was eight, Dave was a budding pianist, at least until his classical teacher chided him for putting a Mozart piece to a conga rhythm, and discouraged him from further study. "When someone tells you it's not supposed to be fun," Frishberg recalls, "that'll turn you right off." After that, except for lessons in his teens from a piano player named Jimmy Mulcrone, and courses in music theory at the University of Minnesota, where he was a journalism student, Frishberg was essentially a self-taught pianist.

But it wasn't until he moved to New York City in 1957, after a two-year stint in the Air Force, that Frishberg realized that he wanted to be a jazz musician. He took a job at radio station WNEW, writing continuity and public service announcements, but he spent his late-night hours hanging out with musicians and sitting in at every loft and club he could find. "I knew within the first month after I hit New York," Frishberg remembers, "that I would have to toss the rest of that aside and become a musician. There was no choice really, I had to do it. It was the greatest joy of my life to know that I was committed to music, and I didn't have to worry about those other careers, what ever they might have been. I surrendered to music and it felt great.

"I think that, unconsciously, the reason I went to New York was to be near all those great players," he recalls. Within a few years, Frishberg was working in rhythm sections with many of those great musicians, including Al Cohn, Zoot Sims, Ben Webster, Gene Krupa, and Bobby Hackett. It was when he started working for such vocalists as Carmen McRae, Jimmy Rushing, Dick Haymes, Anita O'Day, and Irene Kral, that Frishberg was inspired to write his own songs. The first was "Peel Me a Grape" in 1962. "I was accompanying a lot of singers in those days," he says, "and I began to look critically at their repertoires, and I was so taken with admiration of the songwriters that I was starting to look at—Mercer, Loesser, Lerner and Loewe."

In 1971, Frishberg moved to Los Angeles, where he wrote songs for the NBC comedy series *The Funny Side*, took various film, TV, and session assignments, and started singing his songs in public. When he was working in Jack Sheldon's band in Los Angeles, the trumpeter would casually announce, "Now Dave Frishberg's gonna sing." "I'd sing 'I'm Hip' and get laughs," he says, "and that would kind of encourage me." After opening a show for Bing Crosby in 1977, Dave became a singer in earnest. "I did it with hat in hand, so to speak," he recalls, "until I realized that I really loved it. It was more fun than I'd ever had. I think what turned the tide," Dave continues, "was when I appeared in a tribute to Hoagy Carmichael at Carnegie Hall, and found myself entertaining all those people." Frishberg's entertaining style has since been honored with two Grammy nominations (for *The Dave Frishberg Songbooks* on Omnison).

In 1986, Dave moved to Portland, Oregon with his wife, Sam, and toddler, Harry. He recently finished work on a musical that he wrote with playwright Terry Curtis Fox, and he has found that, if anything, living in the Northwest has increased his workload. "People started to call me to write," he says, "which never happened that much in Los Angeles. That's exactly how I planned it on paper, I was going to concentrate on writing." Commercial assignments may be one form of motivation, but Frishberg's artistic influences remain the great musicians he admired early on, as revealed by the Frank Loesser, Irving Berlin, Zoot Sims, and Duke Ellington tunes on *Can't Take You Nowhere*. Has his young son Harry inspired any songs yet? "He's an inspiration in other areas of my life," Dave explains, "but I still prefer Duke Ellington."