

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY  
**JOEL & ETHAN COEN**

**OSCAR ISAAC  
CAREY MULLIGAN  
JOHN GOODMAN  
GARRETT HEDLUND  
JUSTIN TIMBERLAKE**

**INSIDE  
LLEWYN  
DAVIS**



**BACKGROUND**



★

# THE WORLD OF LLEWYN DAVIS

BY ELIJAH WALD

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**T**he Greenwich Village of Llewyn Davis is not the thriving folk scene that produced Peter, Paul and Mary and changed the world when Bob Dylan went electric. It is the folk scene in the dark ages before the hit records and big money arrived, when a small coterie of true believers traded old songs like a secret language. Most of them were kids who had grown up on the streets of New York or the prefab suburbs of Long Island and New Jersey, trying to escape the dullness and conformity of the Eisenhower 1950s. Some were college students living at home with their parents, others shared apartments in what was still the old, immigrant New York of Little Italy and the Lower East Side, where a two-person hole-in-the-wall could be had for twenty-five or thirty dollars a month.

Some details of Llewyn seem like nods to familiar figures—his Welsh name recalls Dylan, and like Phil Ochs he crashes on the couch of a singing couple named Jim and Jean. But the film catches him in the moment before Dylan and Ochs arrived in New York, when no one could have imagined the Village scene becoming the center of a folk music boom that would produce international superstars and change the course of popular music. This moment of transition—before the arrival of the 60s as we know them—was captured by one of the central figures on that scene, Dave Van Ronk, in his memoir *The Mayor of MacDougal Street*, which the Coen Brothers mined for local color and a few scenes. Llewyn is not Van Ronk, but he sings some of Van Ronk's songs and shares his background as a working class kid who split his life between music and occasional jobs as a merchant seaman.



Llewyn also shares Van Ronk's love and respect for authentic folk music, songs and styles created by working class people and passed on from one artist to another, polished by the ebb and flow of oral tradition. For Van Ronk's generation, that well-worn authenticity provided a profound contrast to the ephemeral confections of the pop music world, and the choice to play folk music was almost like joining a religious order—complete with a vow of poverty, since there were virtually no jobs in New York for anyone who sounded like a traditional folk artist. That would change in the early 1960s, and already there were glimmerings of the world to come—a few small clubs where people could play once in a while for tips and little record companies that might not pay anything but at least were willing to record the real stuff. With all its difficulties, Van Ronk recalled that time with deep affection—like Llewyn he was living hand-to-mouth and sleeping on couches, but for a while he was surrounded by people for whom the music mattered more than anything else.

The Village folk scene of the late 1950s has mostly been ignored or forgotten by later fans and historians, who tend to jump from Pete Seeger and his hits with the Weavers at the beginning of the decade to Dylan's arrival in 1961. By contrast, Van Ronk recalls this as a key period in which an intimate band of young musicians shaped a new approach to folksinging, studying old records to capture the grit and rawness of Delta blues and Appalachian ballads, then finding ways to make that music express their own feelings and desires. Most of these musicians did not go on to professional careers, or even make a record. (The Kossoy Sisters were among the few to be recorded, and their 1957 album was forgotten by all but the most ardent folk fans until the Coen Brothers used its version of "I'll Fly Away" to score part of their characters' odyssey through rural Mississippi in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*) The Village scene of the late 1950s was a world of sincere, enthusiastic amateurs, ignored by the outside world but intensely dedicated and fired by youthful optimism. Van Ronk remembered, "We had no doubt that we were the cutting edge of the folk revival—but bear in mind, we were in our late teens and early twenties, and if you do not feel you are the cutting edge at that age, there is something wrong with you. Of course we were the wave of the future—we were 21!"

Looking back from the twenty-first century, it can be hard to remember how different things were in the days before the constant barrage of mass media and instant communication, and the extent to which even bright young musicians in New York City could live in their own world. The center of the Village scene in those days was not a nightclub or coffeehouse, but Washington Square Park, where singers and musicians gathered to jam on Sunday afternoons. Van Ronk started showing up in the mid-1950s, and recalled that there would be six or seven groups playing at the same time, each with their own circle of friends and listeners. By the arch at the bottom of Fifth Avenue, a crowd of kids who had gotten into folk music at progressive summer camps and Labor Youth League get-togethers would be singing union songs they had picked up at Pete Seeger concerts or from *Sing Out!* magazine. Over by the Sullivan Street side of the square the young Zionist socialists of Hashomer Hatzair would be singing "Hava Nagila" and doing Israeli folk dances. Around the fountain, a banjo virtuoso named Roger Sprung led the first wave of urban bluegrass musicians, picking high-octane hoedowns and singing in nasal harmony.

Sprung was one of the few people on that scene who had any connection with the commercial music business: he had recorded four songs in the early 1950s with a group called the Folk-

say Trio, whose two other members shortly renamed themselves the Tarriers and got two top ten hits, “Cindy, Oh Cindy” and “The Banana Boat Song.” A song the Tarriers recorded with Sprung, “Tom Dooley,” was copied by a younger group called the Kingston Trio and topped the pop chart in 1958.

The Tarriers and Kingston Trio were part of a pop-folk trend that now tends to be remembered as hokey, lightweight silliness, and the Washington Square crowd helped shape our modern opinion. For most of the young musicians in the Village, it represented the bland conformity and commercial culture they hated and were trying to escape. As Van Ronk recalled, with typical vituperation, “We knew about the Kingston Trio and Harry Belafonte and their hordes of squeaky-clean imitators, but we felt like that was a different world that had nothing to do with us. Most of those people couldn’t play worth a damn and were indifferent singers, and as far as material was concerned they were scraping the top of the barrel, singing songs that we had all learned and dropped already. It was *Sing Along with Mitch* and the *Fireside Book of Folk Songs*, performed by sophomores in paisley shirts, and it was a one hundred percent rip-off: they were ripping off the material, they were ripping off the authors, composers, collectors, and sources, and they were ripping off the public.”

The pop folkies Van Ronk ridiculed might rule in suburbia and Midwestern college campuses, but they had little impact on what was heard or played in New York clubs, much less by the hardcore folkniks in Washington Square. No one on that scene remembers Roger Sprung for his near brush with the Top Forty. They remember him as an older musician who knew more than the rest of them about real Southern music, and was willing to teach anyone who cared about that style. He was in the Square every Sunday, accompanied by a fellow named Lionel Kilberg who played a home-made washtub bass, and they would have a cluster of younger players around them that over the years included pretty much all the musicians who went on to lead the urban old-time and bluegrass scenes of the 1960s. Kilberg was particularly important because he was also the person who went down to city hall each month and got the permit to play music in the Square. The permit allowed them to be there from one to five o’clock, and the permit-holder had to be physically present for the singing to be legal, so Kilberg was the one absolutely necessary participant.

Along with the folkdancers, the political sing-along kids, and the bluegrassers, young soloists would sit on benches or around the fountain near the arch, playing guitars, banjos, or dulcimers and singing ballads and blues. If they were any good or had enough friends, they would be surrounded by small circles of listeners, and when someone learned a new song they would bring it down to the park and other people would pick it up. Van Ronk would normally be there singing blues, and the Kossoys, Paul Clayton, or the folklorist Roger Abrahams sang ballads from the British Isles or the Southern mountains. Sometimes an older, established performer like Oscar Brand or Theodore Bikel might show up, or someone might bring Woody Guthrie—he was already incapacitated by Huntington’s Chorea and couldn’t sing, but he would occasionally strum a few chords—or the Reverend Gary Davis, a Harlem street preacher and guitar virtuoso who was the main inspiration for a generation of young fingerpickers.

Van Ronk recalled that the ballad singers and blues people tended to hang with each other because there were not many of either, and they formed a sort of clique within the clique: “We

banded together for mutual support, because we didn't make as much noise as the other groups, and we hated them all—the Zionists, the summer camp kids, and the bluegrassers—every last, dead one of them. Of course, we hated a lot of people in those days.”

In hindsight, those ballad and blues singers were shaping a new aesthetic that would produce people like Dylan, Ochs, Joan Baez, Joni Mitchell, and inspire the folk-rock innovations of the Lovin' Spoonful, the Byrds, the Mamas and the Papas, and Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young. (Meanwhile a related scene was being nurtured in Britain by ballad revivalists like Ewan MacColl—Llewyn Davis sings MacColl's "Shoals of Herring" to his aging father—and hardcore blues record collectors like the young men who became the Rolling Stones.) But in the late 1950s they did not know they were on the cusp of a new era, and if anyone had told them they were sowing the seeds of a future pop or rock trend most of them would have been horrified. As Alan Lomax said, welcoming viewers to a filmed jam session in his fifth-floor walk-up apartment, "You're in Greenwich Village now, where people come to get away from America." They were a small band of true believers, outside the mainstream not only of American commercial culture, but of any mainstream, and they were proud of their independence and their secret knowledge.

Van Ronk wryly dubbed his crowd the "neo-ethnics," and to some extent they were a folk equivalent of the "early music" movement happening at the same time in the classical world—it makes perfect sense that when Llewyn Davis visits an older academic couple, the other guests include a man who plays harpsichord in a group called *Musica Anticha*. As in the classical world, there were famous concert artists who played in places like Carnegie and Town Hall, and then there were the young, fervent disciples searching out rare, old material and trying to play it "authentically," the way it would have sounded in its original time and place. Several of the Washington Square regulars were pursuing degrees in folklore and some made trips down South in search of old musicians and scratchy 78s. For those who remained in New York, the bible was a set of six LPs that had been assembled by a beatnik eccentric named Harry Smith and issued on the Folkways label in 1952 as *The Anthology of American Folk Music*. Compiled from recordings made for the "Race" and hillbilly markets in the 1920s, the *Anthology* introduced them to artists like Mississippi John Hurt and the banjo player Dock Boggs, and the neo-ethnics assiduously imitated every quirk and nuance of what they regarded as the real, raw antithesis of the pap purveyed by the pop folkies.

Van Ronk recalled that a lot of people listened to that set so many times that they knew every song on all six albums: "We did not like everything on those records, but it was all important to us because it showed us what was out there and how it really sounded, from the sources rather than from second- and third-hand interpreters. It changed everything, because the previous generation had liked folk songs, but sang them like trained concert singers. For us, what mattered was authenticity, reproducing the traditional ethnic styles all the way down to getting the accents right. It did not matter whether you were ethnic à la Furry Lewis, or à la Jimmie Rodgers, or à la Earl Scruggs; that was a matter of personal taste. But that it should all be authentically ethnic was a matter of principle."

As in any sect, some people were more orthodox than others. Van Ronk, like Ramblin' Jack Elliott before him and Bob Dylan a couple of years later, worked hard to get the rough, raspy vo-



cal styles of the mountains and prairies, but other singers were willing to compromise at least a little with modern, urban tastes. Most of the women on the scene sang in lovely, clear sopranos, sometimes adopting a Southern accent but rarely striving to sound like aged farmwives. But they still studied old records and collections of ancient ballads published by academic archivists, and mastered archaic instruments like the Appalachian dulcimer.

Of all the early neo-ethnics, Paul Clayton was the most successful at combining scholarship and performance. (A handsome, bearded man, he also looked a bit like Justin Timberlake's Jim Berkey.) Clayton had a degree in folklore and had traveled around the South interviewing and recording older musicians, discovering artists like the black fingerpicker Etta Baker and the medicine show bluesman Pink Anderson. He was also the most successful performer in the clique of true believers: while the others were lucky to record a song or two on various folk compilations, he made fifteen solo LPs in the six years from 1954 to 1959. But he was not part of the pop-folk world, people like the Weavers, the Tarriers, and Harry Belafonte who were adapting traditional songs into pseudo-folk hits like "Goodnight, Irene" and "The Banana Boat Song." His albums were mostly on Folkways Records, a small, independent label that made the bulk of its profits by selling to libraries and universities. As Van Ronk recalled, "Every time Paul needed a few bucks he would hunt up some obscure folklore collection, then go see Moe Asch at Folkways and say, 'You know, Moe, I was just looking through your catalog, and I noticed that you don't have a single album of Maine lumberjack ballads . . .'"

"Moe would say, 'Well, I guess that's a pretty serious omission. Do you know anyone who can sing enough of those to make a record?'"

"And Paul would say, 'Well, as it happens...'"

Clayton's album titles give an idea of the result: along with *Timber-r-r! Lumberjack Folk Songs & Ballads*, they include *Wanted for Murder: Songs of Outlaws and Desperados*, *Bay State Ballads*, *Cumberland Mountain Folksongs*, and *Whaling and Sailing Songs from the Days of Moby Dick*. But along with the serious folklore, he also reshaped some old songs for his concert performances, writing new verses and reworking melodies, and even recorded a couple of these creations with semi-pop arrangements. None of them attracted much attention beyond the local folk scene, but his influence went a long way: a song he recorded in 1959 called "Who's Gonna Buy You Ribbons" was the inspiration for Bob Dylan's "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right."

I'm walking down that long, lonesome road,  
You're the one that made me travel on...  
So it ain't no use to sit and sigh now, darlin',  
And it ain't no use to sit and cry now.  
It ain't no use to sit and wonder why, darlin',  
Just wonder who's gonna buy you ribbons when I'm gone.

If few people remember Clayton today, that is a reminder of how completely the scene changed in the few years between the late 1950s and the early 1960s. The neo-ethnics never expected to become stars—if they had nurtured any dreams of commercial success they would not have devoted themselves to folk music. In retrospect it is easy to see the Village scene of the late



1950s as a training ground for the big time, and it certainly was a hotbed of youthful enthusiasm and musical dedication, remembered by many of its denizens as their equivalent of Paris in the 1920s. But a look at the *Village Voice's* club and coffeehouse listings puts those memories in perspective. There were some folksingers there, but they are rarely the top-billed names, and they were competing with a lot of other music. In October of 1961, when Dylan got his big break at Folk City—the only New York folk club of that period that had a liquor license, and the model for the bar in *Llewyn Davis*—it was as opening act for a local bluegrass band, the Greenbriar Boys. There were only two other clubs in town advertising any folksingers by name, and both featured older cabaret-style performers rather than members of the young Village crowd. Meanwhile, the main rooms were sticking to jazz: Thelonious Monk, Ornette Coleman, Zoot Sims, Horace Silver, Herbie Mann—and as a reminder of how fast the times would soon be changing, Silver and Mann were on a double bill with Aretha Franklin as the opening act. (That was not particularly unusual: two months earlier, Aretha was in the same club opening for the John Coltrane Quintet.)

As for the coffeehouse where Dylan made his New York debut, the Café Wha?, its advertisement named no individual performers, but just showed a picture of a beatnik in beret, beard, and sunglasses and listed the entertainment as “folk singing, comedy, calypso, poetry, and congas” in “Greenwich Village’s Swingingest Coffee House.” The Wha? was an out-and-out tourist trap, run by a smart hustler named Manny Roth whose show biz savvy would be passed on to his nephew David Lee Roth of Van Halen. Its regular performers included Richie Havens, Fred Neil and Karen Dalton, now recalled as folk legends, but it made the overhead by pulling in audiences of out-of-town tourists who had come to gawk at the beatniks and weirdos.

The Village’s first full-time folk club, the Café Bizarre, had set the pattern back in 1957. Van Ronk played there on opening night and remembered, “it was selling the squares a Greenwich Village that had never existed. The ambiance was cut-rate Charles Addams haunted house: dark and candle-lit, with fake cobwebs hanging all over everything. The waitresses were got up to look like Morticia, with fishnet stockings, long straight hair, and so much mascara that they looked like raccoons.” It was a Hollywood notion of beatnik life, as shown in movies like *Bell, Book, and Candle* where witches and warlocks mixed with beat poets and no one could tell the difference, or in TV shows like *Dobie Gillis* and *Peter Gunn*. For a while the *Voice* even ran a weekly ad for a “Rent-a-Beatnik” service that would send a bearded, bereted hipster to liven up the dulllest party.

In the context of the 1950s it did not take much to be typed as a beatnik weirdo. Llewyn Davis’s beard would have been enough to make most right-thinking Americans giggle and point at him—compared to the crew cuts and button-down shirts of normal young people, it was the temporal equivalent of facial tattoos and multiple piercings. For an older generation that had lived through the Depression and two world wars and now was relaxing in the safety of the steadiest economic boom the American middle class has ever known, the only explanations for choosing a life of sleeping on floors and devoting one’s days to obscure poetry and archaic music were insanity or perversion. Meanwhile, to the young Villagers, the older tourists represented the conformist mindlessness that had produced the McCarthy witch-hunts and the Cold War and was threatening the world with atomic Armageddon. The two groups were divided by a wall

of mutual fear and mistrust, and to add insult to injury when the conventional older Americans showed up in the Village they acted like the whole place was a kind of absurd amusement park, and treated anyone who was trying to be a serious artist as part of the crazy show.

The Bizarre and the Wha? were particularly obvious about catering to the tourist trend, but even the less gaudy clubs were tough rooms to work. While the bars had to close at one a.m., the coffeehouses stayed open as long as they had customers, so performers often played five or six sets a night, seven nights a week. The crowds were rowdy, the money often just came from a tip basket, and the pace was grueling, but as a result the Village was a unique training ground. Van Ronk grumbled about the audiences and the exploitation, but also argued that those clubs taught his generation lessons they could not have learned anywhere else, balancing their devotion to unpopular ethnic styles and explaining how people like Dylan and Ochs became the best singer-songwriters in the country within a year or two of arriving. “We had so much opportunity to try out our stuff in public, get clobbered, figure out what was wrong, and go back and try it again. It was brutally hard work, because these crowds of tourists usually started out at the bars and by the time they got around to us they were completely loaded. So we would be playing for audiences of fifty or a hundred drunken suburbanites who really could not have cared less about the music—they were there to see the freaks and raise some hell. In that kind of situation, you either learn how to handle yourself onstage or you go into some other line of work, and the people who stuck it out became thoroughly seasoned pros.”

The musicians who gathered in Washington Square were inspired by a shared devotion to authentic, honest music with deep history in a mythic rural America, but the club scene was driven by harsh economic realities. The New York cabaret laws were among the strictest in the country, and the only reason a lot of clubs booked folksingers was that it was a way around the regulations: an “incidental music” clause designed for restaurant background music made an exception for groups that had less than four people and did not include wind, brass or percussion instruments. That meant a club could feature poets or folksingers without meeting the arcane licensing strictures and high fees required for jazz groups, and that was particularly attractive when they began serving an audience of tourists who didn’t care about the music anyway.

In some ways this situation worked to the folksingers’ benefit, but along with making the clubs less than perfect concert rooms it also provided fuel for old prejudices. The tourists tended to lump folksingers and beatniks together, but when Van Ronk talked about the people his crowd hated, the beatniks were only a few steps behind the suburban squares and once again the dislike was mutual: “The beats liked cool jazz, bebop, and hard drugs, and hated folk music, which to them was all these fresh-faced kids sitting around on the floor and singing songs of the oppressed masses. When a folksinger would take the stage between two beat poets, all the finger-poppin’ mamas and daddies would do everything but hold their noses. Then, when the beat poets would get up and begin to rant, all the folk fans would do likewise.”

Van Ronk was not talking about the older beats—to someone who dreamed of being a rambling hobo with a guitar slung over his shoulder, Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* went right along with Woody Guthrie’s songs—but by 1960 that generation was no longer reciting in the coffeehouses and the young beatniks tended to be local, middle-class kids like the folkies, who dressed like





parodies of urban Bohemians and listened to ridiculous poems. As for the beats' opinion of the folk crowd, it was a mix of the contempt avant-garde outsiders have for fresh-faced do-gooders and the contempt jazz aficionados had for those who sang droning ballads and only knew three chords. The character played by John Goodman in *Llewyn Davis* is loosely based on the songwriter Doc Pomus, a Jewish New Yorker who earned his stripes in the 1940s singing blues in black nightclubs, and his reaction to Llewyn is typical of most jazz fans and serious hipsters on that scene: "What'd you say you played? Folksongs? I thought you said you were a *musician*."

The famous slogan of the 1960s, "Don't trust anybody over thirty," reflected a generational split that in some ways was even more important than the musical divides. For Van Ronk or Llewyn Davis, people like Pomus and Thelonious Monk might be respected as artists and Bohemian predecessors but nonetheless were part of a different world—even though that world was barely a block away. To complicate matters, that older world included most of the people who might record or hire them. Moe Asch of Folkways Records, the model for the movie's Mel, was 55 years old in 1960 and had recorded Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and Lead Belly, as well as jazz artists like Sidney Bechet and Art Tatum. He genuinely loved traditional folk music and was a political comrade of the "old left" and an early supporter of the new protest song movement, but he was also a hard-nosed, old-fashioned businessman. His records formed the foundation of the neo-ethnic aesthetic, but most of them only reached a small base of cognoscenti, and he subsidized his less profitable projects by being famously stingy with the artists who sold better—as well as being painfully honest with borderline cases like the fictional Llewyn who didn't sell as well as they hoped.

Albert Grossman, model for the movie's Bud Grossman, was only 34 in 1960, but likewise was regarded by Van Ronk's generation as a member of the old guard. He had opened Chicago's Gate of Horn in 1956 as a kind of folk nightclub—it had a liquor license and hired artists the neo-ethnics regarded as "cabaret folksingers," people like Josh White, Bob Gibson, Odetta, and the Clancy Brothers, who sang folk material but presented themselves as experienced entertainers. In the 1960s Grossman would move to New York and become an icon of big-money folk promotion, first creating Peter, Paul and Mary, then managing Dylan's transformation from a waifish, guitar-strumming poet into a rock star. But even in the late 1950s, when he was just a nightclub owner, Van Ronk's crowd tended to dismiss the cabaret style he promoted as slick and fake. The young neo-ethnics tried not to do anything that seemed like professional entertainment. They sang in rough, countrified accents, went onstage in street clothes, and presented their songs with stolid seriousness: In Van Ronk's words, "If you weren't staring into the soundhole of your instrument, we thought you should at least have the decency and self-respect to stare at your shoes." There was a dedicated virtue and honor in this approach—it was similar to what Miles Davis was doing at the same time in jazz, turning his back to the audience so that his listeners were forced to concentrate on the music rather than the visuals—but it made no sense to club owners like Grossman, who balanced their affection for the music with a keen sense of the bottom line. As a result, Grossman never hired the young New Yorkers at the Gate—and Llewyn suffers a variation of Van Ronk's humiliating audition there.

In 1960 nobody who knew the music business and wanted to make a living had any interest in people who sounded like Van Ronk or Dylan. The top folk stars were people with nice voices

who dressed like successful pop or classical musicians: Belafonte and Josh White in tailored silk shirts; the Kingston Trio in matching collegiate casual wear; and older artists like the Weavers, the Rooftop Singers, and the Limelighters in suits and ties or evening gowns. Dylan described the dominant attitude in one of his first songs, “Talking New York,” quoting a club owner telling him, “You sound like a hillbilly. We want folk singers here.”

Folk City’s owner, Mike Porco, the real-life counterpart of the movie’s charmingly cynical Pappie Corsicato, was an exception, but that was because he knew nothing about the music business. He was just a local Italian guy who ran a bar called Gerde’s on a block of factory loft buildings. His main customers were people working in the area, so he did not have a lot of nighttime business and was interested when Izzy Young, who ran a little book and record store called the Folklore Center on MacDougal Street, proposed hosting concerts there. Young was a hardcore traditionalist who had gotten into the scene by doing folk dancing and boasted that his store had the most complete selection of obscure books on world folklore in the United States. The Folklore Center was also a kind of clubhouse for the neo-ethnic crowd—Dylan wrote in *Chronicles* that he wandered in on his first visit to the Village and met Van Ronk there—and when Young started his evening club in Porco’s bar, he meant it to be a showcase for older, “authentic” performers like Reverend Gary Davis and young locals like Van Ronk and Clayton.

That was in January of 1960, and Young ran the club as a non-profit for five months before Porco realized that it was attracting a regular crowd and could be turned into a business. He took over the booking, renamed the place Gerde’s Folk City, and for a while it was the one bar that regularly featured folksingers. That made it a step up financially from the coffeehouses, many of which just paid performers a portion of what people put in the tip basket. But like the bar in *Llewyn Davis*, it was not necessarily a quiet, serious music club. Van Ronk recalled many cheerfully raucous evenings hanging out with Porco and his friends, talking over the poor guys and gals who were trying to sing onstage: “As in most music bars, the people seated in front knew that they were watching a show but the people at the bar would act like they were in another room. When that place was crowded, it was one of the toughest rooms I have ever seen.”

If one wanted to precisely date *Inside Llewyn Davis*, the obvious bookends are the opening of Folk City in January, 1960, and Dylan’s arrival in New York almost exactly a year later. That was a kind of in-between moment, when the scene was obviously changing but no one had any clear idea where it was headed. By the time Folk City was solidly established, the Café Bizarre had been open for three years and had been joined by the Café Wha?, the Commons, and the Gaslight Café, all within a block of each other on or near MacDougal Street and featuring folk music alongside a declining wave of beat poets. More clubs would open over the next few years, till at one point there were almost three dozen within a few blocks, but even in 1960 there was enough work that young musicians were drifting in from all over the country. By the time Dylan arrived from Minnesota, the core of local folk disciples had already been augmented by Carolyn Hester from Texas, Len Chandler from Ohio, and Tom Paxton, model for the movie’s Troy Nelson, from Oklahoma. Like the Coens’ character, Paxton started playing in the Village on weekends while doing his military service at Fort Dix, and he was a new kind of folksinger. His interest was less in learning old songs than in carrying on the tradition by writing new ones—in the movie, Nelson sings Paxton’s “The Last Thing on My Mind”—and he was a key figure in the evolution from neo-ethnics to singer-songwriters.

That evolution has gotten most of the historical attention, thanks to Dylan, Paul Simon, Joni Mitchell, Leonard Cohen, and the other poetic wordsmiths who gravitated to the Village in the next few years, mixing the musical aesthetic of the folk crowd with the literary aesthetic of the beats. It was not an instant shift: when Izzy Young sponsored Dylan's first concert at Carnegie Recital Hall in November, 1961, Dylan had gotten a rave review in the *New York Times* and a contract with Columbia Records, but still attracted barely fifty listeners. His nasal voice and whining harmonica were too raw and abrasive for mainstream music fans, and even after Peter, Paul and Mary made "Blowin' in the Wind" a national hit two years later, nobody could imagine him becoming a pop star in his own right. When his own performing career finally took off, he sounded as baffled as a lot of his old friends on MacDougal Street: "I once thought the biggest I could ever hope to get was like Van Ronk, but it's bigger than that now, ain't it. Yeah man, it's bigger than that. Scary as all shit."

A lot of viewers will probably think of *Inside Llewyn Davis* as an early glimpse of Dylan's kingdom. But it is more accurate to recognize it as a portrait of a smaller and quite different world that was already ending by the time Dylan showed up. Most of the singers and players who were on the Village scene in 1959 or 1960 did not evolve into the folk stars of the next decade. With the exception of Van Ronk and the New Lost City Ramblers, they were swept away by the wave of out-of-town talent or lost interest when the scene shifted from a righteous cult of folk devotees to a commercial circus. The feeling of camaraderie, of being a small band of true believers sleeping on each other's couches and swapping songs till dawn, was replaced by dreams of stardom. A lot of terrific music was made in the Village after 1960—arguably much better music than had been made before—but it was now the center of a national and international trend. Within a few years the intimate Greenwich Village where all the singers knew each other, sang and played with each other, sometimes slept with each other and broke each other's hearts, already felt in some ways as ancient and far away as the sharecroppers' shacks of the Mississippi Delta and the hamlets of Appalachia had seemed to Van Ronk and his young peers in Washington Square.

*Elijah Wald is a musician and writer who spent much of his teens sleeping on Dave Van Ronk's couch near the corner of Fourth Street and Seventh Avenue, and co-authored The Mayor of MacDougal Street.*





★ PUBLICITY CONTACTS ★

U.S.

**EMILY BEAR**

(917) 816-1125  
emilybear99@gmail.com

**CYNTHIA SWARTZ**

STRATEGY PR  
(646) 918-8772  
cynthia.swartz@strategypr.net

**CHRISTINE BATISTA**

CBS FILMS  
(310) 575-7027  
christine.batista@cbs.com

**KAREN PAUL**

CBS FILMS  
(310) 575-7033  
karen.paul@cbs.com

FRANCE

**JEAN-PIERRE VINCENT/VIRGINIE PICAT**

HÔTEL CARLTON  
+04 93 06 43 98/99  
jpvpresse@gmail.com

INTERNATIONAL

**LIZ MILLER**

PREMIER  
+44 207 292 6437  
liz.miller@premiercomms.com

**ANNABEL HUTTON**

PREMIER  
(310) 945-6691  
annabel.hutton@premiercomms.com

**SHYAMA FRIEDENSON**

STUDIOCANAL  
(310) 945-6691  
shyama.friedenson@studiocanal.com

STUDIOCANAL PRESENTS IN ASSOCIATION WITH ANTON CAPITAL ENTERTAINMENT OSCAR ISAAC CAREY MULLIGAN JOHN GOODMAN GARRETT HEDLUND  
F. MURRAY ABRAHAM JUSTIN TIMBERLAKE "INSIDE LLEWYN DAVIS" CASTING BY ELLEN CHENOWETH EXECUTIVE MUSIC PRODUCER T BONE BURNETT EDITOR RODERICK JAYNES COSTUME DESIGNER MARY ZOPHRES  
PRODUCTION DESIGNER JESS GONCHOR DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY BRUNO DELBONNEL A.F.C., ASC EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS ROBERT GRAF OLIVIER COURSON RON HALPERN PRODUCED BY SCOTT RUDIN ETHAN COEN JOEL COEN  
WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY JOEL COEN & ETHAN COEN

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