

Biting the Apple in Greenwich Village

Bob Dylan got to New York City in 1961. He immediately set off for the downtown section of New York that is known as Greenwich Village. Let's start off by painting a brief picture of what awaited Mr. Bob as he wandered downtown in search of a career as a modern troubadour.

Mapping the Territory

There is no strict map that defines the New York neighborhood known as Greenwich Village. A loose definition might go like this: Fourteenth Street is the northern border of the neighborhood, and I would suggest Houston Street is the southern border (for those who are not familiar with Manhattan, Houston Street is the equivalent of Zero Street). The eastern edge of the Village, for those who are literal minded, might be Fourth Avenue or Broadway; if we wish to include the so-called East Village, we might go as far east as Avenue A or B. On its west side, Greenwich Village stretches all the way to the Hudson River.

In 1811 New York created a system of streets that ran east–west and avenues that ran north–south. At that time Greenwich Village was known as Green Village, and its residents resisted this attempt to impose order on their chaotic world. City planners then elected to bypass the Village and its strange universe of streets changing names and numbering systems and bizarre intersections like West Fourth Street crossing West Tenth Street. These streets are the same today, along with odd nooks and crannies like MacDougal Alley. Nonetheless, in general New York's avenues follow a numerical pattern from east to west starting at First Avenue and going as

high as 11th Avenue; east of First Avenue they are alphabetical from west to east: Avenue A up to Avenue D. MacDougal Street is a narrow street that runs parallel to the avenues between Sixth Avenue (Avenue of the Americas) and Fifth Avenue.

Residential, Commercial, Mixtures of Both, and Visitors

Different parts of the Village are designated as residential or commercial, and there are often commercial establishments located on the ground floor of apartment buildings. An example of a business/residential mixture is the building on MacDougal that housed the folk music club The Gaslight, the bar the Kettle of Fish, and apartments that were located directly above the club. These establishments were jammed with customers on the weekend, which created inevitable noise problems for renters seeking a peaceful night's sleep. Small streets and even alleys contained brownstones, row houses that were made of brown-colored sandstone.

Many of the apartments on streets like MacDougal Street were available at low cost in the 1950s, but had few amenities. Elevators in these buildings were nonexistent, air conditioning was unknown, and if furnishings were available they included little beyond a bed and a dresser. As the reader will see, Dylan himself lived in such surroundings shortly after he arrived in New York City. In those days, the real estate section of the Sunday *New York Times* was available as a separate section several days in advance. Well-informed Villagers would wait in line to get the paper and be among the first in line to answer an ad.

It was also an illegal but common custom for people to advertise apartments in the weekly *Village Voice* with verbiage like "furniture available." This meant that the apartment seeker basically had to offer a bribe to obtain the lease on a low-cost apartment. I rented an apartment in the East Village. The rent was \$22.85 a month, and I recall paying over a thousand dollars for the "furniture." The apartment was a five-story walk-up with no heat and the bathtub was in the kitchen. "Heat" was available by lighting the stove in the kitchen!

Demography

By the time that Dylan got to Greenwich Village, the population included three different groups. There were Italian immigrants, who dominated the restaurant,

grocery, and bar businesses; Irish immigrants, who dominated the waterfront; and a bohemian population of artists, writers, and musicians that included a mixture of various ethnic groups, including a significant Jewish segment of the population. This generalization, however, didn't always hold. For example, musicians Maria D'Amato (later Muldaur), Dick Rosmini, and John Sebastian came from Italian families and grew up in the Village with their families. Maria later joined Jim Kweskin's Jug Band, and she enjoyed a successful hit record with the novelty song "Midnight at the Oasis" in 1993. Rosmini was an excellent guitarist and banjo player who also pursued his professional interests in photography and audio engineering. Sebastian was the son of famed classical harmonica player John Sebastian. The younger Sebastian wrote many successful songs and founded the band The Lovin' Spoonful.

The Artists

Because Greenwich Village developed a culture that was rich in everything from inexpensive restaurants to specialized groceries and European-style coffeehouses, it became a very comfortable environment for all sorts of artists long before the arrival of Bob Dylan. Visual artists included Andy Warhol and his Factory, Hans Hofmann the painter and art teacher, and Hofmann's students Larry Rivers, Red Grooms, and Helen Frankenthaler. Hofmann lived in a variety of Village apartments on West Eighth, West Ninth, and East Fourth Streets.

Experimental theater thrived in the Village, at such venues as Caffè Cino, the Theatre de Lys, the Cherry Lane Theatre, the Circle in the Square, the Provincetown Playhouse, and the Cornelia Street Café. In the neighboring East Village were the Living Theatre, St. Mark's Playhouse, and La MaMa. There is also a long history of creative writers who lived in the Village. This includes Djuna Barnes, William Burroughs, E.E. Cummings, Theodore Dreiser, Lorraine Hansberry, Norman Mailer, and John Reed.

In addition to the many singer-songwriters and folk singers who we will encounter later in this book, there were many composers and musicians who lived and sometimes performed in the Village or in nearby neighborhoods. This included innovative classical composers John Cage, Morton Feldman, and Edgard Varèse. Among the jazz musicians who lived in the Village or East Village were major composer-performers Charles Mingus and Charlie (Bird) Parker. There were also

several venues that featured various genres of jazz, ranging from Slugs' Saloon, the Village Vanguard, Café Bohemia, the Village Gate, Nick's, and the Half Note.

Midtown

In Midtown Manhattan much of the infrastructure of the business of music, art, and book publishing was centered. There was a string of music stores, literally back to back, on West 48th Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues. Most of the recording studios were located midtown on the west side, and the more important and successful booking agents and personal managers of musicians were there as well. So were the music publishers, notably at the Brill Building, which was located on 49th Street, and another building at the corner of 51st Street. It became the world headquarters for early rock-and-roll hit-makers.

Before He Came to New York

Bob Dylan was born Robert Allen Zimmerman in Duluth, Minnesota, on May 24, 1941. He lived in Duluth until the age of six, when his father contracted polio and moved the family to his wife's hometown of Hibbing, Minnesota. Bob went through high school in Hibbing, and was enrolled as a student at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis from fall 1959 until fall 1960.

During his high school days Bob played piano and guitar and performed at some high school dances, and during his time at the university he hung out in the bohemian section of Minneapolis known as Dinkytown. He became friendly with white blues singers John "Spider" Koerner, Dave "Snaker" Ray, and Tony "Little Sun" Glover. Minneapolis-based folk music fans John Pankake and Paul Nelson founded the fanzine *The Little Sandy Review* in 1959, and Bob became friendly with them and listened to many of the folk music recordings that the magazine received. Bob borrowed many of Nelson's records, sometimes without permission. In 1959 he traded his electric guitar for a Martin acoustic model and took to emulating Oklahoma-born songwriter Woody Guthrie. In 1960 Dylan quit college and set off for New York, hoping to meet Woody Guthrie and to begin a career as a professional folksinger.

WOODY GUTHRIE



1. Woody Guthrie, in 1943, with his guitar carrying the motto “This machine kills fascists.” Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

Woody Guthrie was a singer-songwriter before that descriptor was known to music critics. Woody had a colorful if erratic life, performing successfully on radio on the West Coast, and recording numerous albums for Moe Asch’s various record labels. Woody wrote a number of “protest-y” songs, quite a few children’s songs, and other songs that didn’t necessarily take a specific point of view. In Minneapolis, Dylan had listened to Woody’s records, and had read his fictionalized autobiography, *Bound for Glory*. Guthrie’s greatest influence on the young Dylan was probably through his sense of irony; for example, in his song about the gangster “Pretty Boy Floyd,” Woody says “some will rob you with a pistol, and some with a fountain pen.”

By the time Bob Dylan got to New York, Guthrie was diagnosed with the neurological ailment known as Huntington's Disease. This required him to be hospitalized at Greystone Park State Hospital in Morris Plains, New Jersey. Bob took a bus to the hospital to meet the singer, where he sang Woody his own composition "Song to Woody," and in turn Woody gave Bob a card that said "I ain't dead yet."* (The Woody Guthrie Center in Tulsa sells a shirt that has the "I ain't dead yet" quote on it.) Several of Woody's family members observed that Woody seemed to have a special attachment to Bob. Bob also attempted to visit Woody's family in Brooklyn. He was searching for song lyrics that he had been advised had been left in Woody's house. Woody's ex-wife and caretaker Marjorie wasn't home when Dylan arrived, but Bob met Guthrie's daughter Nora and his young son Arlo, who went on to become a well-known songwriter and performer in his own right.

Because of Woody's illness, he served as a mentor to Bob Dylan without ever really being able to communicate. Dylan recorded several talking blues, which was a song form that Woody often used. In the talking blues form the singer talks rather than sings the lyric, with simple guitar accompaniment. Dylan famously broke his one-and-a-half-year silence following his 1966 motorcycle accident to perform at a Carnegie Hall fundraiser for Guthrie's children.

How Zimmerman Became Dylan

While in Minneapolis Bob conceived the notion of establishing a new identity for himself that was closer to the image that he wished to portray. He floated the names Elston Gunn, Robert Allin, and Bob Dillon before settling on Robert Dylan. In 1962, he legally changed his name to Bob Dylan.**

*Casper Llewellyn Smith, "Bob Dylan Visits Woody Guthrie," *Guardian*, June 16, 2011, www.theguardian.com/music/2011/jun/16/bob-dylan-woody-guthrie.

**See Clinton Heylin, *The Double Life of Bob Dylan: A Restless, Hungry Feeling (1941-1966)* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2021).

Early Mythology

In addition to changing his name to create a new identity and image for himself, Dylan also created a series of stories that reinforced the mystery of his upbringing. In press interviews he claimed to be an orphan who ran away from home numerous times, and said that he had traveled with a caravan and had learned how to play guitar from a one-eyed Indian in Tucson, Arizona. Folk fans were startled when it emerged that these tales were fantasies, and not facts. Blues artists such as Robert Johnson and Big Bill Broonzy and folk singer Jack Elliott similarly created identities and names and identities for themselves.