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# Chronicles Volume One

## Bob Dylan

### Chapter 1: Markin' Up the Score

Lou Levy, top man of Leeds Music Publishing company, took me up in a taxi to the Pythian Temple on West 70th Street to show me the pocket sized recording studio where Bill Haley and His Comets had recorded "Rock Around the Clock" -- then down to Jack Dempsey's restaurant on 58th and Broadway, where we sat down in a red leather upholstered booth facing the front window.

Lou introduced me to Jack Dempsey, the great boxer. Jack shook his fist at me.

"You look too light for a heavyweight kid, you'll have to put on a few pounds. You're gonna have to dress a little finer, look a little sharper -- not that you'll need much in the way of clothes when you're in the ring -- don't be afraid of hitting somebody too hard."

"He's not a boxer, Jack, he's a songwriter and we'll be publishing his songs."

"Oh, yeah, well I hope to hear 'em some of these days. Good luck to you, kid."

Outside the wind was blowing, straggling cloud wisps, snow whirling in the red lanterned streets, city types scuffling around, bundled up -- salesmen in rabbit fur earmuffs hawking gimmicks, chestnut vendors, steam rising out of manholes.

None of it seemed important. I had just signed a contract with Leeds Music giving it the right to publish my songs, not that there was any great deal to hammer out. I hadn't written much yet. Lou had advanced me a hundred dollars against future royalties to sign the paper and that was fine with me.

John Hammond, who had brought me to Columbia Records, had taken me over to see Lou, asked him to look after me. Hammond had only heard two of my original compositions, but he had a premonition that there would be more.

Back at Lou's office, I opened my guitar case, took the guitar out and began fingering the strings. The room was cluttered -- boxes of sheet music stacked up, recording dates of artists posted on bulletin boards, black lacquered discs, acetates with white labels scrambled around, signed photos of entertainers, glossy portraits -- Jerry Vale, Al Martino, The Andrews Sisters (Lou was married to one of them), Nat King Cole, Patti Page, The Crew Cuts -- a couple of console reel-to-reel tape recorders, big dark brown wooden desk full of hodgepodge. Lou had put a microphone on the desk in front of me and plugged the cord into one of the tape recorders, all the while chomping on a big exotic stogie.

"John's got high hopes for you," Lou said.

John was John Hammond, the great talent scout and discoverer of monumental artists, imposing figures in the history of recorded music -- Billie Holiday, Teddy Wilson, Charlie Christian, Cab Calloway, Benny Goodman, Count Basie, Lionel Hampton. Artists who had created music that resonated through American life. He had brought it all to the public eye. Hammond had even conducted the last recording sessions of Bessie Smith. He was legendary, pure American aristocracy. His mother was an original Vanderbilt, and John had been raised in the upper world, in comfort and ease -- but he wasn't satisfied and had followed his own heart's love, music, preferably the ringing rhythm of hot jazz, spirituals and blues -- which he endorsed and defended with his life. No one could block his way, and he didn't have time to waste. I could hardly believe myself awake when sitting in his office, him signing me to Columbia Records was so unbelievable. It would have sounded like a made-up thing.

Columbia was one of the first and foremost labels in the country and for me to even get my foot in the door was serious. For starters, folk music was considered junky, second rate and only released on small labels. Big-time record companies were strictly for the elite, for music that was sanitized and pasteurized. Someone like myself would never be allowed in except under extraordinary circumstances. But John was an extraordinary man. He didn't make schoolboy records or record schoolboy artists. He had vision and foresight, had seen and heard me, felt my thoughts and had faith in the things to come. He explained that he saw me as someone in the long line of a tradition, the tradition of blues, jazz and folk and not as some newfangled wunderkind on the cutting edge. Not that there was any cutting edge. Things were pretty sleepy on the Americana music scene in the late '50s and early '60s. Popular radio was sort of at a standstill and filled with empty pleasantries. It was years before The Beatles, The Who or The Rolling Stones would breathe new life and excitement into it. What I was playing at the time were hard-lipped folk songs with fire and brimstone servings, and you didn't need to take polls to know that they didn't match up with anything on the radio, didn't lend themselves to commercialism, but John told me that these things weren't high on his list and he understood all the implications of what I did.

"I understand sincerity," is what he said. John spoke with a rough, coarse attitude, yet had an appreciative twinkle in his eye.

Recently he had brought Pete Seeger to the label. He didn't discover Pete, though. Pete had been around for years. He'd been in the popular folk group The Weavers, but had been blacklisted during the McCarthy era and had a hard time, but he never stopped working. Hammond was defiant when he spoke about Seeger, that Pete's ancestors had come over on the Mayflower, that his relatives had fought the Battle of Bunker Hill, for Christ's sake. "Can you imagine those sons of bitches blacklisting him? They should be tarred and feathered."

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"I'm gonna give you all the facts," he said to me. "You're a talented young man. If you can focus and control that talent, you'll be fine. I'm gonna bring you in and I'm gonna record you. We'll see what happens."

And that was good enough for me. He put a contract in front of me, the standard one, and I signed it right then and there, didn't get absorbed into details -- didn't need a lawyer, advisor or anybody looking over my shoulder. I would have gladly signed whatever form he put in front of me.

He looked at the calendar, picked out a date for me to start recording, pointed to it and circled it, told me what time to come in and to think about what I wanted to play. Then he called in Billy James, the head of publicity at the label, told Billy to write some promo stuff on me, personal stuff for a press release.

Billy dressed Ivy League like he could have come out of Yale -- medium height, crisp black hair. He looked like he'd never been stoned a day in his life, never been in any kind of trouble. I strolled into his office, sat down opposite his desk, and he tried to get me to cough up some facts, like I was supposed to give them to him straight and square. He took out a notepad and pencil and asked me where I was from. I told him I was from Illinois and he wrote it down. He asked me if I ever did any other work and I told him that I had a dozen jobs, drove a bakery truck once. He wrote that down and asked me if there was anything else. I said I'd worked construction and he asked me where.

"Detroit."

"You traveled around?"

"Yep."

He asked me about my family, where they were. I told him I had no idea, that they were long gone.

"What was your home life like?"

I told him I'd been kicked out.

"What did your father do?"

"Electrician."

"And your mother, what about her?"

"Housewife."

"What kind of music do you play?"

"Folk music."

"What kind of music is folk music?"

I told him it was handed down songs. I hated these kind of questions. Felt I could ignore them. Billy seemed unsure of me and that was just fine. I didn't feel like answering his questions anyway, didn't feel the need to explain anything to anybody.

"How did you get here?" he asked me.

"I rode a freight train."

"You mean a passenger train?"

"No, a freight train."

"You mean, like a boxcar?"

"Yeah, like a boxcar. Like a freight train."

"Okay, a freight train."

I gazed past Billy, past his chair through his window across the street to an office building where I could see a blazing secretary soaked up in the spirit of something -- she was scribbling busy, occupied at a desk in a meditative manner. There was nothing funny about her. I wished I had a telescope. Billy asked me who I saw myself like in today's music scene. I told him, nobody. That part of things was true, I really didn't see myself like anybody. The rest of it, though, was pure hokum -- hophead talk.

I hadn't come in on a freight train at all. What I did was come across the country from the Midwest in a four-door sedan, '57 Impala -- straight out of Chicago, clearing the hell out of there -- racing all the way through the smoky towns, winding roads, green fields covered with snow, onward, eastbound through the state lines, Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania, a twenty-four-hour ride, dozing most of the way in the backseat, making small talk. My mind fixed on hidden interests...eventually riding over the George Washington Bridge.

The big car came to a full stop on the other side and let me out. I slammed the door shut behind me, waved good-bye, stepped out onto the hard snow. The biting wind hit me in the face. At last I was here, in New York City, a city like a web too intricate to understand and I wasn't going to try.

I was there to find singers, the ones I'd heard on record -- Dave Van Ronk, Peggy Seeger, Ed McCurdy, Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry, Josh White, The New Lost City Ramblers, Reverend Gary Davis and a bunch of others -- most of all to find Woody Guthrie. New York City, the city that would come to shape my destiny. Modern Gomorrah. I was at the initiation point of square one but in no sense a neophyte.

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When I arrived, it was dead-on winter. The cold was brutal and every artery of the city was snowpacked, but I'd started out from the frostbitten North Country, a little corner of the earth where the dark frozen woods and icy roads didn't faze me. I could transcend the limitations. It wasn't money or love that I was looking for. I had a heightened sense of awareness, was set in my ways, impractical and a visionary to boot. My mind was strong like a trap and I didn't need any guarantee of validity. I didn't know a single soul in this dark freezing metropolis but that was all about to change -- and quick.

The Café Wha? was a club on MacDougal Street in the heart of Greenwich Village. The place was a subterranean cavern, liquorless, ill lit, low ceiling, like a wide dining hall with chairs and tables -- opened at noon, closed at four in the morning. Somebody had told me to go there and ask for a singer named Freddy Neil who ran the daytime show at the Wha?

I found the place and was told that Freddy was downstairs in the basement where the coats and hats were checked and that's where I met him. Neil was the MC of the room and the maestro in charge of all the entertainers. He couldn't have been nicer. He asked me what I did and I told him I sang, played guitar and harmonica. He asked me to play something. After about a minute, he said I could play harmonica with him during his sets. I was ecstatic. At least it was a place to stay out of the cold. This was good.

Fred played for about twenty minutes and then introduced all the rest of the acts, then came back up to play whenever he felt like it, whenever the joint was packed. The acts were disjointed, awkward and seemed to have come from the Ted Mack Amateur Hour, a popular TV show. The audience was mostly collegiate types, suburbanites, lunch-hour secretaries, sailors and tourists. Everybody performed from ten to fifteen minutes. Fred would play for however long he felt, however long the inspiration would last. Freddy had the flow, dressed conservatively, sullen and brooding, with an enigmatical gaze, peachlike complexion, hair splashed with curls and an angry and powerful baritone voice that struck blue notes and blasted them to the rafters with or without a mike. He was the emperor of the place, even had his own harem, his devotees. You couldn't touch him. Everything revolved around him. Years later, Freddy would write the hit song "Everybody's Talkin'." I never played any of my own sets. I just accompanied Neil on all of his and that's where I began playing regular in New York.

The daytime show at the Café Wha?, an extravaganza of patchwork, featured anybody and anything -- a comedian, a ventriloquist, a steel drum group, a poet, a female impersonator, a duo who sang Broadway stuff, a rabbit-in-the-hat magician, a guy wearing a turban who hypnotized people in the audience, somebody whose entire act was facial acrobatics -- just anybody who wanted to break into show business. Nothing that would change your view of the world. I wouldn't have wanted Fred's gig for anything.

At about eight o'clock, the whole daytime menagerie would come to a halt and then the professional show would begin. Comedians like Richard Pryor, Woody Allen,

Joan Rivers, Lenny Bruce and commercial folksinging groups like The Journeymen would command the stage. Everyone who had been there during the day would pack up. One of the guys who played in the afternoons was the falsetto-speaking Tiny Tim. He played ukulele and sang like a girl -- old standard songs from the '20s. I got to talking to him a few times and asked him what other kinds of places there were to work around here and he told me that sometimes he played at a place in Times Square called Hubert's Flea Circus Museum. I'd find out about that place later.

Fred was constantly being pestered and pressured by moocher types who wanted to play or perform one thing or another. The saddest character of all was a guy named Billy the Butcher. He looked like he came out of nightmare alley. He only played one song -- "High-Heel Sneakers" and he was addicted to it like a drug. Fred would usually let him play it sometime during the day, mostly when the place was empty. Billy would always preface his song by saying "This is for all you chicks." The Butcher wore an overcoat that was too small for him, buttoned tight across the chest. He was jittery and sometime in the past he'd been in a straitjacket in Bellevue, also had burned a mattress in a jail cell. All kinds of bad things had happened to Billy. There was a fire between him and everybody else. He sang that one song pretty good, though.

Another popular guy wore a priest's outfit and red-topped boots with little bells and did warped takes on stories from the Bible. Moondog also performed down here. Moondog was a blind poet who lived mostly on the streets. He wore a Viking helmet and a blanket with high fur boots. Moondog did monologues, played bamboo pipes and whistles. Most of the time he performed on 42nd Street.

My favorite singer in the place was Karen Dalton. She was a tall white blues singer and guitar player, funky, lanky and sultry. I'd actually met her before, run across her the previous summer outside of Denver in a mountain pass town in a folk club. Karen had a voice like Billie Holiday's and played the guitar like Jimmy Reed and went all the way with it. I sang with her a couple of times.

Fred always tried to make a place for most performers and was as diplomatic as possible. Sometimes the room would be inexplicably empty, sometimes half-empty and then suddenly for no apparent reason it would be flushed with people with lines outside. Fred was the man down here, the main attraction and his name was on the marquee, so maybe a lot of these people came to see him. I don't know. He played a big dreadnought guitar, lot of percussion in his playing, piercing driving rhythm -- a one-man band, a kick in the head singing voice. He did fierce versions of hybrid chain gang songs and whomped the audience into a frenzy. I'd heard stuff about him, that he was an errant sailor, harbored a skiff in Florida, was an underground cop, had hooker friends and a shadowy past. He'd come up to Nashville, drop off songs that he wrote and then head for New York where he'd lay low, wait for something to blow over and fill up his pockets with wampum. Whatever it was, it wasn't a huge story. He seemed to have no aspirations. We were very compatible, didn't talk personal at all. He was very much like me, polite but not overly friendly, gave me pocket change at the end of the day, said "Here...so you'll keep out of trouble."



The best part of working with him, though, was strictly gastronomical -- all the French fries and hamburgers I could eat. At some point during the day, Tiny Tim and I would go in the kitchen and hang around. Norbert the cook would usually have a greasy burger waiting. Either that, or he'd let us empty a can of pork and beans or spaghetti into a frying pan. Norbert was a trip. He wore a tomato-stained apron, had a fleshy, hard-bitten face, bulging cheeks, scars on his face like the marks of claws -- thought of himself as a lady's man -- saving his money so he could go to Verona in Italy and visit the tomb of Romeo and Juliet. The kitchen was like a cave bored into the side of a cliff.

One afternoon I was in there pouring Coke into a glass from a milk pitcher when I heard a voice coming cool through the screen of the radio speaker. Ricky Nelson was singing his new song, "Travelin' Man." Ricky had a smooth touch, the way he crooned in fast rhythm, the tonation of his voice. He was different than the rest of the teen idols, had a great guitarist who played like a cross between a honky-tonk hero and a barn-dance fiddler. Nelson had never been a bold innovator like the early singers who sang like they were navigating burning ships. He didn't sing desperately, do a lot of damage, and you'd never mistake him for a shaman. It didn't feel like his endurance was ever being tested to the utmost, but it didn't matter. He sang his songs calm and steady like he was in the middle of a storm, men hurling past him. His voice was sort of mysterious and made you fall into a certain mood.

I had been a big fan of Ricky's and still liked him, but that type of music was on its way out. It had no chance of meaning anything. There'd be no future for that stuff in the future. It was all a mistake. What was not a mistake was the ghost of Billy Lyons, rootin' the mountain down, standing 'round in East Cairo, Black Betty bam be lam. That was no mistake. That's the stuff that was happening. That's the stuff that could make you question what you'd always accepted, could litter the landscape with broken hearts, had power of spirit. Ricky, as usual, was singing bleached out lyrics. Lyrics probably written just for him. I'd always felt kin to him, though. We were about the same age, probably liked the same things, from the same generation although our life experience had been so dissimilar, him being brought up out West on a family TV show. It was like he'd been born and raised on Walden Pond where everything was hunky-dory, and I'd come out of the dark demonic woods, same forest, just a different way of looking at things. Ricky's talent was very accessible to me. I felt we had a lot in common. In a few years' time he'd record some of my songs, make them sound like they were his own, like he had written them himself. He eventually did write one himself and mentioned my name in it. Ricky, in about ten years' time, would even get booed while onstage for changing what was perceived as his musical direction. It turned out we did have a lot in common.

There was no way to know that standing in the kitchen of the Café Wha? listening to that smooth, monotone drawl. The thing was that Ricky was still making records and that's what I wanted to do, too. I envisioned myself recording for Folkways Records. That was the label I wanted to be on. That was the label that put out all the great records.

Ricky's song ended and I gave the rest of my French fries to Tiny Tim, went back into the outer room to see what Fred was up to. I had asked Fred once if he had any

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records out and he said, "That's not my game." Fred used darkness as a musically potent weapon, but as skilled and powerful as he was, there was something that he lacked as a performer. I couldn't figure out what it was. When I saw Dave Van Ronk I knew.

Van Ronk worked at the Gaslight, a cryptic club -- had a dominant presence on the street, more prestige than anyplace else. It had mystique, a big colorful banner out front and paid a weekly wage. Down a flight of stairs next to a bar called the Kettle of Fish, the Gaslight was non-booze but you could bring a bottle in a paper bag. It was shut down in the day and opened early in the evening with about six performers that rotated throughout the night, a closed drawn circle that an unknown couldn't break into. There weren't any auditions. It was a club I wanted to play, needed to.

Van Ronk played there. I'd heard Van Ronk back in the Midwest on records and thought he was pretty great, copied some of his recordings phrase for phrase. He was passionate and stinging, sang like a soldier of fortune and sounded like he paid the price. Van Ronk could howl and whisper, turn blues into ballads and ballads into blues. I loved his style. He was what the city was all about. In Greenwich Village, Van Ronk was king of the street, he reigned supreme.

Once on a cold winter day near Thompson and 3rd, in a flurry of light snow when the feeble sun was filtering through the haze, I saw him walking towards me in a frosty silence. It was like the wind was blowing him my way. I wanted to talk to him, but something was off. I watched him go by, saw the flash in his eye. It was a fleeting moment and I let it go. I wanted to play for him, though. Actually, I wanted to play for anybody. I could never sit in a room and just play all by myself. I needed to play for people and all the time. You can say I practiced in public and my whole life was becoming what I practiced. I kept my sights on the Gaslight. How could I not? Compared to it, the rest of the places on the street were nameless and miserable, low-level basket houses or small coffeeshouses where the performer passed the hat. But I began to play as many as I could. I had no choice. The narrow streets were infused with them. They were small and ranged in shape, loud and noisy and catered to the confection of tourists who swarmed through the streets at night. Anything could pass for one -- double door parlor rooms, storefronts, second story walk-ups, basements below street level, all holes in the wall.

There was an unusual beer and wine place on 3rd Street in what used to be Aaron Burr's livery stable, now called Café Bizarre. The patrons were mostly workingmen who sat around laughing, cussing, eating red meat, talking pussy. There was a small stage in the back and I played there once or twice. I probably played all the places at one time or another. Most of them stayed open 'til the break of day, kerosene lamps and sawdust on the floor, some with wooden benches, a strong-armed guy at the door -- no cover charge and the owners tried to offload as much coffee as they could. Performers either sat or stood in the window, visible to the street, or were positioned at the opposite end of the room facing the door, singing at the top of their voices. No microphones or anything.



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Talent scouts didn't come to these dens. They were dark and dingy and the atmosphere was chaotic. Performers sang and passed the hat or played while watching tourists file past, hoping some of them would toss coins into a breadbasket or guitar case. On weekends, if you played all the joints from dusk 'til dawn, you could make maybe twenty dollars. Weeknights it was hard to tell. Sometimes not much because it was so competitive. You had to know a trick or two to survive.

One singer I crossed paths with a lot, Richie Havens, always had a nice-looking girl with him who passed the hat and I noticed that he always did well. Sometimes she passed two hats. If you didn't have some kind of trick, you'd come off with an invisible presence, which wasn't good. A couple of times, I hooked up with a girl I knew from the Café Wha?, a waitress who was good to the eye. We'd go from place to place, I'd play and she'd take up collection, wear a funny little bonnet, heavy black mascara, low laced blouse -- looked almost naked from the waist up under a capelike coat. I'd split the money with her later, but it was too much of a hassle to do it all the time. I still made more when she was with me than when I was working on my own.

What really set me apart in these days was my repertoire. It was more formidable than the rest of the coffeehouse players, my template being hard-core folk songs backed by incessantly loud strumming. I'd either drive people away or they'd come in closer to see what it was all about. There was no in-between. There were a lot of better singers and better musicians around these places but there wasn't anybody close in nature to what I was doing. Folk songs were the way I explored the universe, they were pictures and the pictures were worth more than anything I could say. I knew the inner substance of the thing. I could easily connect the pieces. It meant nothing for me to rattle off things like "Columbus Stockade," "Pastures of Plenty," "Brother in Korea" and "If I Lose, Let Me Lose" all back-to-back just like it was one long song. Most of the other performers tried to put themselves across, rather than the song, but I didn't care about doing that. With me, it was about putting the song across.

I had stopped going down to the Café Wha? in the afternoons. Never stepped foot in there again. Lost touch with Freddy Neil, too. Instead of going over there, I began hanging out at the Folklore Center, the citadel of Americana folk music. That was also on MacDougal Street, between Bleecker and 3rd. The small store was up a flight of stairs and the place had an antique grace. It was like an ancient chapel, like a shoebox sized institute. The Folklore Center sold and reported on everything that had to do with folk music. It had a wide plate-glass window where records and instruments were displayed.

One afternoon I went up the flight of stairs and wandered in there. I browsed around and met Izzy Young, the proprietor. Young was an old-line folk enthusiast, very sardonic and wore heavy horn-rimmed glasses, spoke in a thick Brooklyn dialect, wore wool slacks, skinny belt and work boots, tie at a careless slant. His voice was like a bulldozer and always seemed too loud for the little room. Izzy was always a little rattled over something or other. He was sloppily good natured. In reality, a romantic. To him, folk music glittered like a mound of gold. It did for me, too. The place was a crossroads junction for all the folk activity you could name and you

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might at any time see real hard-line folksingers in there. Some people picked up their mail there.

Young occasionally produced folk concerts by the unmistakably authentic folk and blues artists. He'd bring them in from out of town to play at Town Hall or at some university. At one time or another I saw Clarence Ashley, Gus Cannon, Mance Lipscomb, Tom Paley, Erik Darling hanging around in the place. There were a lot of esoteric folk records, too, all records I wanted to listen to. Extinct song folios of every type -- sea shanties, Civil War songs, cowboy songs, songs of lament, church house songs, anti-Jim Crow songs, union songs -- archaic books of folk tales, Wobbly journals, propaganda pamphlets about everything from women's rights to the dangers of boozing, one by Daniel De Foe, the English author of *Moll Flanders*. A few instruments for sale, dulcimers, five-string banjos, kazoos, pennywhistles, acoustic guitars, mandolins. If you were wondering what folk music was all about, this was the place where you could get more than a vague glimmer.

Izzy had a back room with a potbellied wood-burning stove, crooked pictures and rickety chairs -- old patriots and heroes on the wall, pottery with crossed-stitch design, lacquered black candlesticks...lots of things having to do with craft. The little room was filled with American records and a phonograph. Izzy would let me stay back there and listen to them. I listened to as many as I could, even thumbed through a lot of his antediluvian folk scrolls. The madly complicated modern world was something I took little interest in. It had no relevancy, no weight. I wasn't seduced by it. What was swinging, topical and up to date for me was stuff like the Titanic sinking, the Galveston flood, John Henry driving steel, John Hardy shooting a man on the West Virginia line. All this was current, played out and in the open. This was the news that I considered, followed and kept tabs on.

As far as keeping tabs on things, Izzy kept a diary, too. It was some sort of ledger that he kept open on his desk. He'd ask me questions about myself like, where it was that I grew up and how did I get interested in folk music, where I discovered it, stuff like that. He'd then write about me in his diary. I couldn't imagine why. His questions were annoying, but I liked him because he was gracious to me and I tried to be considerate and forthcoming. I was very careful when talking to outsiders, but Izzy was okay and I answered him in plain talk.

He asked me about my family. I told him about my grandma on my mom's side who lived with us. She was filled with nobility and goodness, told me once that happiness isn't on the road to anything. That happiness is the road. Had also instructed me to be kind because everyone you'll ever meet is fighting a hard battle.

I couldn't imagine what Izzy's battles were. Internal, external, who knows? Young was a man that concerned himself with social injustice, hunger and homelessness and he didn't mind telling you so. His heroes were Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. *Moby-Dick*, the ultimate fish story, was his favorite tall tale. Young was besieged with bill collectors and dictates from the landlord. People were always chasing him down for money, but it didn't seem to faze him. He had a lot of resilience, had even fought city hall into allowing folk music to be played in Washington Square Park. Everybody was for him.

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He'd pull out records for me. He'd given me a Country Gentlemen record and said I should listen to "Girl Behind the Bar." He played me "White House Blues" by Charlie Poole and said that this would be perfect for me and pointed out that this was the exact version that The Ramblers did. He played me the Big Bill Broonzy song "Somebody's Got to Go," and that was right up my alley, too. I liked hanging around at Izzy's. The fire was always crackling.

One winter day a big burly guy stepped in off the street. He looked like he'd come from the Russian embassy, shook the snow off his coat sleeves, took off his gloves and put them on the counter, asked to see a Gibson guitar that was hanging up on the brick wall. It was Dave Van Ronk. He was gruff, a mass of bristling hair, don't give a damn attitude, a confident hunter. My mind went into a rush. There was nothing between the man and me. Izzy took the guitar down and gave it to him. Dave fingered the strings and played some kind of jazzy waltz, put the guitar back on the counter. As he put the guitar down, I stepped over and put my hands on it and asked him at the same time how does someone get to work down at the Gaslight, who do you have to know? It's not like I was trying to get buddy-buddy with him, I just wanted to know.

Van Ronk looked at me curiously, was snippy and surly, asked if I did janitor work.

I told him, no, I didn't and he could perish the thought, but could I play something for him? He said, "Sure."

I played him "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out." Dave liked what he heard and asked me who I was and how long I'd been in town, then said I could come down about eight or nine in the evening and play a couple of songs in his set. That was how I met Dave Van Ronk.

I left the Folklore Center and went back into the ice-chopping weather. Towards evening, I was over at the Mills Tavern on Bleecker Street where the basket-house singers would bunch up, chitchat and make the scene. My flamenco guitar-playing friend, Juan Moreno, told me about a new coffeehouse that had just opened on 3rd Street, called the Outré, but I was barely listening. Juan's lips were moving, but they were moving almost without sound. I'd never play in the Outré, didn't have to. I'd soon be hired to play at the Gaslight and never see the basket houses again. Outside of Mills Tavern the thermometer was creeping up to about ten below. My breath froze in the air, but I didn't feel the cold. I was heading for the fantastic lights. No doubt about it. Could it be that I was being deceived? Not likely. I don't think I had enough imagination to be deceived; had no false hope, either. I'd come from a long ways off and had started from a long ways down. But now destiny was about to manifest itself. I felt like it was looking right at me and nobody else.