

The Coen brothers' *Inside Llewyn Davis*: The story of a struggling musician ... but which one?

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12 December 2013

Written and directed by Ethan Coen and Joel Coen

In their latest venture the filmmaking team of Joel and Ethan Coen take on the story of the folk music scene in New York City more than half a century ago.

Inside Llewyn Davis focuses on a week in the life of a struggling musician. He can't seem to catch a break, and gets caught up in the kind of tragicomic misadventures that are common to the protagonists in many of the Coens' films.

As the filmmakers have explained, this movie was loosely inspired by the posthumous memoir of Dave Van Ronk (*The Mayor of MacDougal Street*, Da Capo Press, written with the collaboration of Elijah Wald), the singer, songwriter, teacher and leading figure of the folk music revival that peaked in the early to mid-1960s. The film has arrived on movie screens in the US with some fanfare, having won the Grand Prize at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival earlier this year.

The time is the winter of 1960-61 and the place is New York City's Greenwich Village, about to explode with the arrival of Bob Dylan as well as others who will become famous in the next several years.

The name of Dave Van Ronk, through its connection with *Llewyn Davis*, is being brought to the attention of many—especially younger moviegoers—who have never heard of him before. Nonetheless, anyone assuming that the title character is seriously modeled on Van Ronk would be quite mistaken.

This is not a biopic, and the filmmakers make no such claim. They state, in fact, that *Llewyn Davis* is not meant to suggest Van Ronk. Their choices, however, including their protagonist and the elements of Van Ronk's memoir they select to use, are certainly relevant to an evaluation of the work.

Llewyn Davis (Oscar Isaac) is an artist down on his luck. Most of his fellow musicians are not doing much better, but Llewyn is a particularly hapless character.

This is a picture of the folk scene on the cusp of what Van Ronk—whom this reviewer first met some 50 years ago—and others were sometimes to call "the great folk scare." The eve of the revival is still a difficult time for aspiring singers, not all of them equally talented, of course. Llewyn is trying to collect what little is owed to him, to borrow money, to find a bed for the next night or two, and to get some work and possibly a break in his career. He is depicted as a very good musician, if perhaps not yet a great one.

The title character is fairly subdued most of the time, punctuated by several memorable moments when he explodes in anger or frustration. When Jean (Carey Mulligan), part of a singing duo with her partner Jim (Justin Timberlake), informs him that she may be pregnant with his child, she lashes out in fury—even though the baby may not be his—and he takes it mostly in silence.

A lengthy segment follows the adventures of our hero when a house cat escapes from the apartment in which he is staying and he chases in pursuit and is forced to carry his feline companion via subway from the Upper West Side back down to Greenwich Village.

Through Jim and Jean, Llewyn meets Troy Nelson (Stark Sands), a clean-cut soldier stationed at Fort Dix in New Jersey—one of the few characters who seems to be directly based on a real figure, in this case folksinger Tom Paxton—who comes in on the weekends to perform in the Village. Paxton became one of Van Ronk's very close friends. Another figure is Al Cody (Adam Driver), whose cowboy hat may be designed to recall Ramblin' Jack Elliott, also a mainstay of the Village scene and one of Van Ronk's longtime colleagues.

A bit later Llewyn sets out on a disastrous car trip to Chicago in the winter. One of the passengers is a drug-addled jazz musician, Roland Turner (John Goodman), in a cartoonish characterization the Coens all too often resort to. Finally arriving in Chicago, Llewyn makes his way to the Gate of Horn club, where he manages to audition for Bud Grossman (F. Murray Abraham)—clearly modeled after Albert Grossman, the famous folk music promoter and manager. Grossman delivers one of the film's big lines in this brief scene: "I don't see a lot of money here."

The music entrepreneur is putting the young folksinger who strives for truth and authenticity in his place, even if gently. One of the main themes of the film, as it evokes this period in the Village, is the sharp dividing line between "authentic" musicians—like Van Ronk himself—and those, like the Kingston Trio, who crossed over into the pop category.

The film ends with a revealing scene of the young and as yet unknown Bob Dylan playing in the background. Llewyn looks on skeptically. This is meant to suggest the arrival of something new. Singer-songwriters emerged, Dylan most prominently, who would take elements of the folk tradition to create something very different from both the old blues and ballads and the commercial folk-pop sounds of the late 1950s and early 60s, and transform American popular music and rock and roll in the process.

There is much that is interesting and evocative in the film's treatment of the period. Bruno Delbonnel's cinematography is extraordinary, as anyone who walked those streets 50 years ago can attest. The acting is good on the whole, with the performance of Oscar Isaac particularly strong. The young Guatemalan-born actor turns in a performance that veterans of that musical period have lauded as moving and authentic. While his voice is nothing like Van Ronk's, his guitar work is considered to be a remarkable imitation.

In its overall approach to its musical subject matter, *Inside Llewyn Davis* recalls the Coens' *O Brother Where Art Thou?* (2000). T Bone Burnett, the well-known musician and music producer who supervised that film, is back for this latest movie. The soundtrack contains a number of songs

closely associated with Van Ronk, including the magnificent “Dink’s Song,” an American folk song first discovered more than a century ago, and “Green, Green Rocky Road,” in a rendition by Van Ronk himself.

One question that arises in connection with *Llewyn Davis* is why the filmmakers have chosen to put relatively little of Dave Van Ronk’s personality into their new work. The Coens have been outspoken about their admiration for Van Ronk, Ethan Coen telling the *New York Times*, “Dave Van Ronk is not an obscure figure. He’s the biggest figure on an obscure scene, playing a kind of niche music that we knew and liked. We gravitated to his book ... it is a great, and very funny, document of its time.”

T Bone Burnett added his tribute: “Van Ronk was leading a community, he was the gatekeeper of that community, and a damn good one at that.”

But the Coens clearly decided not to show a “leader.” They have extracted a certain mood from Van Ronk’s memoir, and they have given their title character parts of his background. Llewyn, like Van Ronk, is a young man from a working class family in Queens who comes to the Village to learn his musical trade and at one point ships out with the merchant marine.

There are a few other “connections.” The title of the film, for instance, is meant to suggest both the attempt to find out what makes Llewyn Davis tick, as it were, and the title of his album, which is glimpsed on screen when he goes to the dingy office of his record label to try to obtain some cash. The title and cover photo of this fictional album, in turn, are modeled almost exactly on Van Ronk’s 1963 album, *Inside Dave Van Ronk*.

In important respects, however, Llewyn is nearly the opposite of Van Ronk. He seems to have little of Van Ronk’s zest for life, sociability or leadership qualities. The Coens have created a general atmosphere of gloom, one that is quite different from the combative and lively tone of *The Mayor of MacDougal Street*. Of course this is not a documentary and they have every right to establish their own tone, but it leads to a somewhat skewed picture of the period.

This is also bound up with the fact that the Coen brothers, in this and most of their films, appear almost entirely uninterested in social and historical context. The week treated fictionally in *Inside Llewyn Davis* comes around the time John F. Kennedy took office as president, and Dwight Eisenhower delivered his farewell address warning of the power of the “military-industrial complex.” Congolese president Patrice Lumumba was assassinated on orders from the CIA, and the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba was only a few months off. The lunch counter sit-ins that had begun less than a year earlier had inaugurated a new stage of the Southern civil rights movement.

Of course there is no straight line connecting these matters to the coffeehouses of Greenwich Village, but they are not irrelevant. Both the folksingers and their audiences could not help but reflect the big changes taking place in the world; indeed, that is the source of much of what endures in the music. A few years later many of those who had begun to listen to acoustic folk music in the early 1960s would participate in the mass protests against the Vietnam War. Already by the end of the 1950s and early 1960s a growing discontent and sometimes bitter disillusionment with postwar American society found expression in various art forms, including filmmaking.

Nor were the young folksingers of this period unconcerned with politics. Left-wing views were widespread, but Van Ronk himself was far more serious about the historical questions than most of his friends. This led at one point to his political involvement with Trotskyism in the 1960s. As the WSWS explained in our obituary article after his death, he was an opponent of capitalist exploitation, an autodidact who read widely and had also been influenced by the ideas of anarcho-syndicalism.

Van Ronk was a member of the Workers League, the predecessor organization to the Socialist Equality Party, during this period and

remained generally sympathetic to socialism for the rest of his life. Shortly after the launching of the World Socialist Web Site in 1998, the 62-year-old veteran of the folk music scene gave an interview that revealed his somewhat skeptical but still forthright views.

There is no question but that Van Ronk’s “sense of history” influenced his approach to his musical efforts. His wide knowledge, research and broad understanding of the history and development of all the sources of music that interested him, including jazz, blues and folk, was connected to his political outlook, and in turn to his ability to teach and to become the “gatekeeper” that Burnett describes. Certainly his interest (and the interest of others) in various folk-popular forms in the early 1960s was connected to an effort to make some type of contact with the experience and reality of workers and oppressed layers of the population.

Moreover, Van Ronk’s personal generosity and loyalty, his lack of selfishness in comparison with many others, had something to do with a distinctly more expansive view of the world. It is not an accident that he helped his fellow performers along.

Any suggestion based on the association of Van Ronk with Llewyn that the former was something of a “loser” because he did not hit the big time would be absurd. In part because of his approach to life, Van Ronk was not perhaps prepared to make the musical and intellectual accommodations necessary to obtain stardom. Moreover, the circumstances were still difficult at the time for anyone who rejected the strictly commercial route, on the one hand, and Stalinist-influenced folk-purist circles, on the other. It was not necessarily, as it has often not been, a financially rewarding choice to remain independent.

Inside Llewyn Davis is by no means obliged to delve into these issues. The Coen brothers, one would assume, consider Van Ronk’s socialist views to have been more or less an accidental or secondary feature of his life, like smoking or being left-handed but playing the guitar right-handed. Nor do we want to suggest that his beliefs were the only factor determining his fate. However, the artistic and psychological consequence of their complete absence is that the filmmakers have made reference to a highly appealing figure, without presenting or mentioning one of the significant sources of his appeal.

It is telling that the sole reference to politics in the film is an “inside joke” aimed only at sophisticates: when Llewyn tries to retrieve his union card for the merchant marine and the official asks if he is “some kind of Communist,” and then mutters “Shachtmanite?” under his breath. Max Shachtman was the leader of a group that split with the Trotskyist movement in 1940 over the question of the nature of the Soviet Union and later moved very sharply to the right. The Shachtmanites had their headquarters in Greenwich Village in this period.

The inclusion of this “joke” in the film, rather than anything even remotely dealing with the wider political and social context, reveals the Coens’ somewhat cynical view of this history. Perhaps it also has something to do with the gloom, with the portrayal of a musician who seems to have no future. It should be remembered that Van Ronk kept working until the end of his life. He mentored Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell in the 1960s and Suzanne Vega in the 1980s, to name only a few. As his widow, Andrea Vuocolo, told the *New York Times*, “He continued to develop. He didn’t really ever stop.”

Whatever the weaknesses of *Inside Llewyn Davis*, the Coen brothers have evoked at least a portion of a very intriguing period in American musical life, and performed a valuable service in reviving the legacy and contributions of the “mayor of MacDougal Street.”



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