

# Letters from our readers

24 December 2013

*A comment on Inside Llewyn Davis and Dave Van Ronk*

To the Editor:

The Coen brothers' film *Inside Llewyn Davis* has finally opened in Cambridge, so I can now offer an opinion. I think Fred Mazelis is on the mark in his WSWs review. I have enjoyed many of the Coen brothers' films—especially *The Big Lebowski*, *Fargo*, and *A Serious Man*—mainly because of the eccentric, unique, often cynical viewpoint they bring to each project. However, in their latest film, their trademark jaundiced, negative outlook is inappropriate. My discontent is not so much about how the Coen brothers treat Dave Van Ronk, but about how they treat the period and scene.

The Coens refract the gloom and meanness that they see today into 1961, a hopeful and spirited time. Politically, in the early 1960s, things were just beginning to stir, folk music and the rest of the arts were witnessing true innovation, and the people in the milieu depicted in the film were generous and caring.

I was in my early 20s in Greenwich Village at the time this film is set, and though not a musician, I was on the edge of the folk scene and knew some of its participants, including Dave Van Ronk. Rather than a bunch of scattered, narrow, money-obsessed pretenders knocking each other over on the road to fame and big contracts, this was a tightly knit community, full of camaraderie, non-competitiveness, sharing, and creative discovery. These musicians had a hardscrabble existence, but they argued not so much—as in the film—over money or who was getting laid by whom, but over music and politics.

Though an outsider, I had a standing invitation to attend the folk music jams every Sunday night at 190 Spring Street, in lower Manhattan. Here, in an apartment packed with people, the folk music flowed non-stop and musicians shared ideas and tips on finger-picking.

Not to idealize, but it was a great time to be alive in New York City.

This is a dark, joyless film, including in its cinematography. Whether they gave a true portrait of Dave Van Ronk or not, there's a bright world that the Coens could have taken from Van Ronk and Elijah Wald's book, *The Mayor of MacDougal Street*, but they *chose* not to. Dave was a Falstaffian character—charismatic, personally entertaining, able to engage large audiences or small circles, and funny. He was also very well-read, musically curious and explorative, a mentor to many, and highly political. There is so much of Van Ronk that could have found its way into the Llewyn Davis character (who does mimic Van Ronk's fingering), but having that character be a narrow, washed-up, aimless, modestly talented loser with little interest in music fits the Coen brothers' skewed conception of this period and milieu. They made their choices.

I feel that, despite its broad characterizations, Paul Mazursky's 1976 film *Next Stop, Greenwich Village* gives a truer depiction of this period and scene. People came into Greenwich Village on weekends or to live there to bathe in the creative scene and the bohemian lifestyle.

It wasn't, as the Coens see it, all about money. In the case of Dave Van Ronk and his many colleagues, it was about their art.

Marty J

Cambridge, Massachusetts

20 December 2013

*On "US academics approve boycott of Israeli universities"*

Following the legacy that the WSWs attest to stand for, this article goes to the essence of what the boycott ultimately will achieve. It also offers an alternate and valid approach in objection. In these times it becomes ever more important to make this essence be known.

EB

21 December 2013

*On* “Christie’s appraisal paves way for sale of Detroit Institute of Arts masterpieces”

It makes me so sad, and so angry, that these important works could end up in some billionaire’s private collection. These are part of our common heritage and should be held by the public for the public. What is happening to the DIA exemplifies the deeply sick greed of the ruling class.

Charles T

20 December 2013

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Thought for the day: “It must always be one of the aims of the thinking proletariat to deprive the possessing classes of the monopoly of culture.” Karl Kautsky - 1902

Heinz S

California, USA

20 December 2013



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