

# An interview with Elijah Wald, author of *Dylan Goes Electric!*

David Walsh  
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Elijah Wald (born 1959) is a musician, journalist and music historian. He is the author of a number of books, including *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (2005), *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock 'n' Roll: An Alternative History of American Popular Music* (2009), *The Blues: A Very Short Introduction* (2010) and *Jelly Roll Blues—Censored Songs & Hidden Histories* (2024).

His *Dylan Goes Electric! Newport, Seeger, Dylan, and the Night That Split the Sixties* (2015) is the work on which the recent film about Bob Dylan's early days in music, *A Complete Unknown* (James Mangold), is loosely based. Wald also co-authored folk singer and musician Dave Van Ronk's posthumously published memoir, *Dave Van Ronk: The Mayor of MacDougal Street* (2005).

We spoke in January in a video call.

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David Walsh: For the benefit of our readers, could you give us a sense of your own background and how you came to be interested in music, or play music, or listen to music?

Elijah Wald: Sure. I grew up in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which doesn't hurt, particularly for the kind of music we're talking about.

The first concert I remember seeing in my life was a children's concert when I was five years old by Jim Kweskin and the Jug Band. That world was all around me. I was probably eight years old and saw Pete Seeger with the crew of the Sloop Clearwater. For me, it just was like, "Okay, that looks like more fun than what any of the other grownups were doing, I want to do that."

That was the plan. I read Woody Guthrie's *Bound for Glory*. I was going to be a rambling hobo folk singer. That was that, and basically that was how I planned my life for the next 20-plus years.

I was lucky. I had a half-brother who played guitar. He was painfully shy about it, I never heard him play, but I did have his records. He had the complete country blues fan's record collection circa 1965 or so. So I grew up on that as well. I had an uncle who had gone to school with [critic] Ralph Gleason and could get me free records from Fantasy Records, so I had a couple of things with Dave Van Ronk on them.

I saw that Van Ronk was going to be playing in Boston. My mom took me to the concert, I think I was 13, and I was absolutely blown away. A week or so later, a young woman who was over at our house turned out to be a close friend of Dave's, and she took me to meet him next time he played in Boston. I learned that he gave guitar lessons, and when it got time to go to college, I decided to go to New York University for one year so I could take guitar lessons from Dave Van Ronk—and then I would drop out and be a rambling folk singer, and that's what I did.

I actually went off to Europe where it was easier to be a rambling hobo folk singer than in the US. For the next 12 years basically, I went back and forth trying to make a living that way, and eventually started doing a little bit of writing for the *Boston Globe*. The years went by, and with every passing year, I was making more money from the writing and it was becoming clearer that I was not going to be able to make a living just

playing music.

I continued and continue to do both, but the writing eventually treated me better than the music did economically.

I made a living full-time as a writer. I did some teaching, like a lot of writers. Basically, writing was the main income and the Bob Dylan book [*Dylan Goes Electric!*] is a perfect example.

First time around, that book paid for two years of my life, second time with the movie, that paid for another two years of my life. That's not normally how my books work, but that's how Dylan books work. That's why I did a Dylan book. I did not expect a movie, but I did the Dylan book specifically because my previous book had not sold well, and I needed to do a book that was going to sell.

DW: Has it sold, besides being made into a movie?

EW: Oh, yeah. How well the book sold to the public is another question. But it sold to a publisher instantly for three times as much as I've ever gotten for any of my other books. Dylan books, despite the fact that there are so many of them, are an easy sell. I think it's because of the way the economics of the book industry work. Essentially, women are book buyers, and physical books—and this originally came out strictly as hardcover—are things people buy as gift items. Every white woman in America over the age of 40 knows a man who is a Dylan nut.

This didn't occur to me until I was going around doing signings and women kept coming up, buying the book and asking me to sign it to a male name.

DW: Nonetheless, whatever its origins, you obviously took the assignment seriously because it's an interesting, complicated book.

EW: It's actually a funny story. I got into that book because I'd written a book called *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock 'n' Roll* [2011], which is a history of popular music from 1890 to 1970 with a catchy title, so people will pick it up. But in February 2014, the 50th anniversary of the Beatles arriving in the US, some reporters who didn't have any better ideas or who'd run out of other angles, were calling me up for Beatles stories.

I thought, is there a 50th anniversary coming up that I could jump on? I thought of Dylan going electric in Newport. I figured, that's been written about so much, I could just pull together a book. I'll only have six months or so, but it's all out there. I could just pull something together quick and dirty.

Then I started looking into it and realized that everything I had gone in thinking I knew was wildly oversimplified or simply wrong. It ended up being a very, very busy six months. It is a complicated story, and he's not the only complicated person involved.

I had originally imagined doing a sort of background of the folk scene, and then Dylan arrives, but I realized it would work better as a narrative if I made Pete Seeger stand for the entire folk scene, which he reasonably was in that moment.

As of 1960, whatever you meant by the folk scene, you meant some kind of Pete Seeger music. And that, for me, became the heart of the project, because I think the way a lot of people see that story is Pete was

the open, simple guy, and in comes this complicated, difficult guy who's Bob Dylan—and there was no one on earth more complicated than Pete Seeger.

So it became the whole story of these two very complicated, very guarded, I think very shy, and in their separate ways, extraordinarily talented and influential figures, who came together and split apart.

DW: When did you become aware of Bob Dylan?

EW: Ha. I can tell you almost exactly. My father brought back *Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits* [1967]. My father [scientist George Wald] was a professor, very active in the anti-war movement and very interested in being in tune with his students. So he picked up *Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits* because he wanted to know who this guy was.

I had this little four-speed record player up in my room, but my parents wouldn't let me play their LPs on it. But I inherited my grandparents' 78 albums, and therefore my records were the basic Jewish Communist record collection circa 1944. So I had the Almanac Singers, the Union Boys, Leadbelly, Josh White, Paul Robeson and the Spanish Civil War songs and the Red Army Chorus.

I didn't much like the Red Army Chorus, but all the rest of those I listened to assiduously. I may be the youngest person on the planet who was a Woody Guthrie nut before I heard Bob Dylan. In any case, my father brought home the *Greatest Hits*, and he put on "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35."

I said, he's a terrible singer. My father said, but he sounds like Woody Guthrie. I said, he doesn't sound anything like Woody Guthrie, which by that time in his career was true. So that's when I first heard Dylan. Like a lot of people, sort of like the people who booed when he went electric at Newport, I got over that first reaction and was a hardcore fan certainly within weeks, if not within days.

DW: What were the myths or unresolved questions you wanted to address, or that you came across, in writing your Dylan book?

EW: There were a couple of key things I didn't understand. The central thing was I went in like everybody else thinking about Dylan as a songwriter, and it rather quickly struck me that the story of Dylan going electric at Newport in 1965 is not at all about songwriting.

That's a story about Dylan as a musician and performer. Everybody traces Dylan in terms of the background that leads to his becoming a songwriter, and how he develops as a songwriter. If you simply put that aside and try to trace his musical evolution, it's a very, very different picture. He starts out playing in a rock 'n' roll band in high school, he gets into folk music, specifically through black folk singers.

I know a number of black musicians who got into folk music following Harry Belafonte, Odetta and Leon Bibb. That was not an unusual path for any young black singer who reached folk music at all, the few who did in that moment. But I know of no other white performer who came in by that route.

The story is that Dylan showed up in New York because of Woody Guthrie. That's partly true, but not because he wanted to play like Woody Guthrie or write like Woody Guthrie. The key Woody Guthrie addiction for him, as it was for me, was reading *Bound for Glory* and wanting to be Woody Guthrie. Being Woody Guthrie was a completely different exercise.

In the earliest interview with Dylan, when someone, in fact, Izzy Young [of the Folklore Center in Greenwich Village], described him as playing folk music, Dylan said, I don't even know what that means. I play old jazz tunes, pop 40 stuff, cowboy songs. People have to call it something, so they call it folk music. He meant that. He was being Woody Guthrie, who likewise played whatever was on the jukebox and old blues songs. And, yes, Dylan also wrote some stuff, and he rather quickly met up with Dave Van Ronk, and blues really became what he did.

The first album [*Bob Dylan*, 1962] is heavily blues-influenced, but the second album that never got issued, which he was recording before he

made the left turn into *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* [1963] was a blues album, part acoustic, part electric. If you think about the fact that he was recording electric blues back in '61-62, that completely changes the story of his finally making that music three or four years later.

He basically made a brief left turn into writing the sort of songs that Albert Grossman could hand to Peter, Paul and Mary and get top 40 hits. But most of us came to him via Peter, Paul and Mary and *Blowin' in the Wind* [1962] and thought of him as the guy who writes those pretty folk songs, and he never was that guy, except for two years in the middle there.

DW: Van Ronk thought of himself as a jazz musician. Why did the music suddenly become channeled through this genre called folk music?

EW: First of all, because it was happening. Second of all, because you didn't have to hold a band together. You could just go out there by yourself with a guitar. Whatever kind of music you play, the money is lousy if you're a relative unknown. Be it Van Ronk with jazz, where you would need to be probably five or six guys, or Dylan with rock 'n' roll, where you would need four or five guys, the money would be exactly the same as if you went out there by yourself with an acoustic guitar. So just economically, there were huge advantages to the folk scene.

DW: But why was the folk scene going? That's the question.

EW: Largely, actually for the same reason, because it was cheap. Part of the answer is there are a bunch of different folk scenes. The world of the Tarriers, the Kingston Trio and all of that was happening because pop music had hit an impasse.

You had, on the one hand, characters like Frank Sinatra essentially still doing the music of the 1940s. On the other hand, you had rock, which was dumb teenage music. If you were a college student in this environment and wanted your sound, basically your options were modern jazz, the baroque "early music" revival, which was happening in the same world, or folk music.

Most people didn't choose between them. Typically, if you went into a college dorm at that point, someone who had a Kingston Trio album was likely to also have some Bach or [Alfred] Deller Consort, Miles Davis, Dave Brubeck definitely. Dave Brubeck and the Kingston Trio were in the same record collection.

The way people think about genre is completely wrong. What we're talking here is class. This is the middle class intelligentsia listening to Brubeck and the Kingston Trio.

The left were the intellectuals, the intellectuals were listening to folk music. After the McCarthy era knocks out the first round of folkies, it doesn't knock out that association of folk music being what the smart people are listening to.

It's one of the weird facts of life—I mention it in the Dylan book—that the Kingston Trio make their East Coast debut at [Greenwich Village jazz club] the Village Vanguard on a double bill with Thelonious Monk.

In Greenwich Village there was another thing happening, which was the Beat coffeehouses with the poets, and in between the poets, they would stick on folk singers, frankly, because like the poets, they would work for virtually nothing. And they were around. By the early 60s, you had a huge audience of people from Omaha and so forth who had seen *Bell, Book and Candle* [1958 film set in Greenwich Village]. When they came to New York, they wanted to go to a Broadway show, go see the Statue of Liberty, and go down to the Village and see the weirdos.

*Dobie Gillis* [a television situation comedy with a prominent "Beatnik" character] and *Bell, Book and Candle*. So there was this audience that was being bused in on weekends, and making the coffeehouses a going proposition, and they had to fill the stage with something.

So, it's poets and folk singers. It wasn't particularly economically viable. Then the Kingston Trio got their hits, and then Albert Grossman had this brilliant idea of Peter, Paul and Mary. If you look at the first Peter, Paul and Mary album [1962], Peter and Paul look like members of the Modern Jazz Quartet, they have exactly the same beards and suits, and

they're standing against the same brick wall, and they have the beautiful blond between them, which is a nice addition.

It was simply designed to be the collegiate sound of the moment. Grossman heard Bob Dylan's songs and he went, "Perfect." And there's the package. It's what the intelligent young English major is listening to.

DW: Yes, but it seems to me at a certain point, something else comes up, something else bubbles up. There's an audience ...

EW: There's the civil rights movement.

DW: There's a hunger for something.

EW: There was a hunger for something, but that hunger was being sated in a lot of different ways. There was your roommate, if you were unlucky, or the guy next door, if you were slightly luckier, who couldn't understand why you were listening to that stupid folk garbage, rather than Miles Davis! There were plenty of ways to be smart, right? When Dylan went electric, it gave people permission, in fact, to pull out the records they really enjoyed, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, and to feel that that was just as grown up and intelligent, indeed more intelligent.

DW: There was the desire obviously of a generation, or part of a generation, for what they perceived to be more authentic, less slick, less palatable and less commercial than Sinatra and Broadway musicals.

EW: Pete Seeger clearly was part of that. And let's remember that Joan Baez is the unbelievable breakthrough in this whole period. Because the Kingston Trio was fun and they had singles on the radio, but Joan Baez never has a hit single if we're talking that early period, like '60, '61, '62, she has no singles, no radio play. She puts out three albums, and I think if you look at the top one hundred selling albums in 1962, three of them are Joan Baez albums on a classical music label with no singles.

Because she is the most uncommercial artist on the planet, and she really was. That's one of the interesting things, unlike Bob Dylan, who wanted to be a rock star, Joan Baez really, truly was the character that she portrayed.

There are many ways to define authenticity, but one is not wanting to be part of the pop music machine. Joan Baez, at every turn, when offered a chance to be part of that machine, refused, and yet became huge. There it gets gendered, because it was much, much more a female audience than a male audience who went with Baez, and also Peter, Paul and Mary.

I think the authenticity thing you mention is absolutely real and very powerful, particularly in that moment where a lot of young people are profoundly disaffected with what was going on in the world around them. But there were a lot of ways to be a rebel, disaffected and looking for "the real thing."

You could go with hardcore rock 'n' roll. You could go Joan Baez. You could, as I said, go to jazz. You could go back to early music, which was bound up with that same concern for authenticity—no symphonies, no playing Bach on piano, it's going to be harpsichord.

I don't think there's any accident to the fact that the same record companies recording young musicians playing folk music authentically on banjos are also putting out Bach played authentically on harpsichord. Be it Vanguard [Records], be it Elektra, be it Folkways. The overlap of early music and the authentic end of the folk scene, I think there's nothing accidental there at all.

DW: I would argue there are relatively universal, objective qualities in music. There's a reason why people are still listening to Bob Dylan in some cases, or, for that matter, Bach.

EW: I don't know if you actually want to go down this road, but if you do, no, I disagree completely.

DW: Okay, well, let's not then. In your book, you build up a picture of Bob Dylan's development.

I was struck by the fact that in high school, he was a would-be rock and roll musician. It seems that the Woody Guthrie interest came out of nowhere. You suggest that it was more a literary-lifestyle issue than a musical one, linked to his reading *Bound for Glory*.

You point out as well that he was a sponge, that he picked up things enormously quickly, and that was a great strength. He could take on various personas quickly, and with a certain depth and with a certain understanding.

It doesn't seem to me that there was anything necessarily cynical about his radicalization for a few years. It happened to a good many people. He came and went more quickly than many others.

EW: I think one thing that one needs to understand is that there are different kinds of radicals. There are people who come in who are willing to do the reading. There are people who come in because they are seeking a community. And there are people who come in because they are angry and want to break stuff, and this seems like a group that's doing that.

I think Dylan comes in, if he's going to be found in one of those groups, definitely in group three. He comes in as James Dean, *Rebel Without a Cause*. The rebel part is absolutely real and deep and part of him, but the cause is transitory.

DW: It's more intuitive and so forth, and you can feel that in his work.

EW: To me, the brilliant political Dylan line is from *Talkin' New York*. This is from his first album, recorded in late 1961, before he's gotten political, before the Watts riots or anything like that:

A lot of people don't have much food on their table  
But they got a lot of forks 'n' knives  
And they got to cut something.

That's a level of radicalism, in one sense, that the liberal left found completely unacceptable. In some ways it's a more extreme radicalism than the civil rights movement, which he had not yet gotten into. That's real.

DW: Yes. It's not a question of indicting him or wagging a finger, but I do think he lost something later on because he didn't understand the source of some of his own strengths.

I think the comment you have in the book by Seeger from 1967 was interesting:

The left tried to lionize him; he reacted violently against this, saying fuck you to them all. He dressed outlandishly, screamed out new songs with electric backing; cynicism came to the foreground.

My own sense of it is that he reacted with some legitimacy against the leftist folk music establishment. But I do think he threw the baby out with the bathwater, and that he convinced himself that the source of his music was his own genius. There are always currents that have made you what you are, and by throwing those out the window, to me he became less interesting. He was swept up in a certain radicalism for a few years, and then he decided that was not for him.

EW: I think that's not accurate. It was never that he was swept up in political radicalism. It was about the people around him. For a few years, he was hanging out in a world where all of his friends were engaged in that.

It's not that he had those beliefs for a while, and then he abandoned those beliefs. It's that he was in that social group for a while, and then he moved to another social group.

He always was rebelling against people telling him you're this or you're that. Once in a while, he would be with people and he would feel, hey, we're all against the same stuff. But then he had a tendency to feel, no, I'm trapped here too, and go somewhere else. [Dylan's girlfriend] Suze Rotolo said there was never a time when he was the sort of person

who was burying himself in the newspapers.

If you're hanging out with Dave Van Ronk, your political analysis will be different than if you're hanging out with the Rolling Stones. It won't be more rebellious. But the way you're channeling your rebellion will be completely different.

DW: But you make certain choices about the people you hang out with. Look, there's also the siren song of celebrity, of money. He wanted to be a rock and roll star. In any case, we're not going to resolve these issues in this conversation.

How did your relationship with Dave Van Ronk come about? How was that?

EW: Everything I am, I was made by Van Ronk. That's the brief, simple answer. I went to him when I was 17 years old. I'd already been sitting around with him when I was 15 and 16. My understanding of how the world works, my understanding of how music works, my understanding of how music works in the world, it's all straight out of Dave.

DW: How did he feel about his own career, or success or lack of success, do you think?

EW: It depended on the year. His overall view was that, given where he started from, he did better than anyone could have ever expected. There was a period in the second half of the 1960s when he saw a lot of less talented people grabbing the brass ring, and he kept grabbing for it and missing, and that was extremely frustrating.

By the mid '70s, he was extremely depressed. Then he pulled out of that and went back to, okay, compared to where I started, given my background, I've been able to live a reasonably middle class life without ever having to do a day's work. Can't argue with that.

DW: Obviously, you can't choose the circumstances under which you work.

EW: He made a number of grabs at the brass ring. They could have worked. They didn't.

DW: I've never heard his rock 'n' roll music, is it good?

EW: Depends what you mean by good. It was not designed to make him a rock star. Was it harmonically complex? Yes. Was some of it a lot of fun? Yes. Did it get the kids dancing? No. Did it make the charts? No. Was it one of his favorite albums till the day he died? Yes.

If you held a gun to his head and said, we're now going to listen to a Dave Van Ronk album from beginning to end, what would you like to hear? It was either going to be the *Ragtime Jug Stompers* [1964] or the *Hudson Dusters* [1967]. Because rather than sitting there listening to all his own mistakes and being annoyed, he could listen to all the cool things the other people on the record were doing and like it.

DW: Did you ever play with him in public?

EW: I never performed on stage with him. I arranged and played one of the tracks on his Bertolt Brecht album [*Let No One Deceive You*, 1992]. I just was in the right place at the right time. He suggested that I do something which he took for granted that I couldn't do, and then I did it, so he was stuck.

He was going to be recording in Vancouver. I said, hey, anything I could do on the album? He said, I'm going to Edmonton. I'll be back in two weeks. If you can come up with an arrangement of "A Man is a Man," I'd love to do that one. He had, I assume, felt like he had dealt with the subject at that point. But as it happened, when he got back in two weeks, I had actually done a pretty nice little arrangement. And so he was stuck.

He was without question the best educated human being I have ever spent time with. There was virtually no subject he could not converse intelligently about with an incredible depth of knowledge.

He was very realistic about his own skills. He thought he was better than a lot of people around him who were more successful than he was. At times he found that annoying, but he also understood that he was not in the same class as people like Louis Armstrong or Sarah Vaughan, and was

not at all bothered.

What bothered him was the Peter, Paul and Marys of the world becoming superstars. George Benson becoming a superstar didn't bother him at all, you know.

DW: Did you have anything to do with the making of *A Complete Unknown*?

EW: No, they bought *Dylan Goes Electric!* and that was it. In fact, it was Dylan's people who bought the book. They were behind this whole project. I had no idea he'd actually read it, but apparently Dylan read it and liked it. I think that speaks to how much of the book is about Seeger and other things around him, rather than about him.

DW: Yes, but I think it's to his credit. As we know, artists are often very petty about those things. It's to his credit that he has that degree of objectivity.

EW: I'm assuming he liked it because it contextualized things.

DW: I don't agree with everything in the book, and we obviously don't see eye to eye on certain things. But I think the book presents an honest picture, with all sorts of elements in it, out of which you can draw your own conclusions. It presents intriguing pieces of the picture.

EW: I'm a historian, not a critic.



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