

# THE VILLAGE TRIP

## Folk Symposium: The Folk Scene in Greenwich Village

Discussion, live music and drinks at the Grisly Pear, MacDougal Street  
Sunday, September 30, at 6.30pm

If you had to pick a date when what became known as the New York folk revival took root, you'd probably choose March 3, 1940. The place was the Forrest Theater on West 49<sup>th</sup> Street, the occasion a benefit for the John Steinbeck Committee for Agricultural Workers. The evening's performers included Lead Belly, Aunt Molly Jackson, Josh White, Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, who alone hailed from New York City. Seeger fumbled his performance of "John Henry" and the evening's star was Guthrie, "offhand and casual... spinning out stories and singings songs he'd made up," Seeger recalled. "I just naturally wanted to know more about him."

"Go back to that night when Pete first met Woody," musician and folklorist Alan Lomax would later reflect. "You can date the renaissance of American folk song from that night."

Soon Seeger and Guthrie, along with Lee Hays, Millard Lampell and Bess Lomax, had formed the Almanac Singers, the first urban folk music group whose line-up, over time, included Josh White, Sis Cunningham, Cisco Houston and Burl Ives. Some of them shared an apartment on 10<sup>th</sup> Street in the Village. There the Almanacs held "hootenannies" – a made-up word coined by Guthrie and Seeger – to help pay the rent.

The group dissolved during the Second World War and in 1948, Seeger joined with Lee Hayes, Ronnie Gilbert and Fred Hellerman to form the Weavers. Like the Almanacs, they found success at the Village Vanguard where they were "discovered" and signed to Decca. For the first time, folk music was in "the hit parade," with songs such as "Goodnight, Irene," "Tzena, Tzena, Tzena," "Rock Island Line" and "The Midnight Special."

*Sing Out!*, a folk-song magazine, emerged from the ashes of the more overtly political People's Songs – *Broadside* would follow a few years later. The *Village Voice* was founded to report on the local culture. And in the late 1950s, Robert Shelton began covering the music emerging from downtown clubs for the *New York Times*. Shelton was both "catalyst and chronicler of the 1960s folk boom," as John Pareles would note in Shelton's 1995 obituary. For the first time, readers were invited to follow a critic down in to the smoke-filled coffee houses of Greenwich Village, much as they followed Harold C Schonberg into Carnegie Hall.

The ground was laid, the scene set.

When three students calling themselves the Kingston Trio took a 19<sup>th</sup> century Carolina murder ballad called “Tom Dooley” to number one on the charts in 1958, the New York folk revival went national.

The history of folk music and its revival is inseparable from the history of Greenwich Village which, in the 1960s, became a mecca for young musicians and singer-songwriters – not least among them, Bob Dylan. “Woody’s children” they were called: the family was soon large indeed. A community built up, a community which spread beyond New York and soon beyond the United States. The songs it sang became synonymous with the struggles for social justice that characterised the 1960s – an era when, as Dylan sang, “there was music in the cafés at night and revolution in the air.”

Folk went electric, the Lovin’ Spoonful and the Mamas and the Papas just two of the bands to emerge from the Village. New acts with their roots in folk got their start on Village stages – Eric Andersen, Richie Havens, Bonnie Rait, James Taylor.... In the 1980s, the arrival of punk and new wave in the East Village served to reinvigorate the Village folk scene, with figures such as Jack Hardy, Rod MacDonald and David Massengill launching a series of workshops which found a home at the Cornelia Street Café as The Songwriters Exchange. Hardy founded a new monthly magazine, *The Coop/Fast Folk Musical Magazine*, from which emerged such figures as Suzanne Vega, Tracy Chapman, Nanci Griffith and Richard Shindell, all of whom found success on the world stage.

As Stephen Petrus concludes in his book *Folk City*, “The folk process, marked by change and continuity, remains an integral part of alternative culture in New York City.”

### ***Why folk music? Why then? And why Greenwich Village?***

These questions and more will be explored in a symposium chaired by Stephen Petrus, historian and co-author of *Folk City: New York and the American Folk Music Revival*. Celebrated musicians will recount their experience of folk music and Greenwich Village, from the 1960s to the present day, and the discussion will be followed by drinks and live music in a style reflecting the glory days of the folk revival.

The event takes place in the Grisly Pear, a flourishing club on historic MacDougal Street, one of the Village’s two main arteries – the other is Bleecker, which crosses it. MacDougal Street was the hub of the beat and folk scenes and has featured in many movies, including *Inside Llewyn Davis*. It remains the ground zero of the vibrant local music scene. The Grisly Pear opened its doors in 1950 as Café Rienzi, a favourite haunt of James Baldwin, Jack Kerouac and Bob Dylan.

**The Village Trip** is a celebration of the history, heritage and culture of Greenwich Village. It is a sponsored project of Fractured Atlas, a non-profit Arts service organisation. Fractured Atlas will receive grants for the charitable purposes of The Village Trip, provide oversight to ensure grants are used in accordance with grant agreements, and provide reports as required by the grantor. Contributions for the charitable purposes of The Village Trip must be made payable to Fractured Atlas and are tax-deductible to the extent permitted by law.

The inaugural festival will take place from September 27 - 30, 2018. More information: [www.TheVillageTrip.com](http://www.TheVillageTrip.com)

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