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Dave Van Ronk (1936-2002) was one of the founding figures of the 1960s folk revival, but he was far more than that. A pioneer of modern acoustic blues, a fine songwriter and arranger, a powerful singer, and one of the most influential guitarists of the '60s, he was also a marvelous storyteller, a peerless musical historian, and one of the most quotable figures on the Village scene. *The Mayor of MacDougal Street* is a first-hand account by a major player in the social and musical history of the '50s and '60s. It features encounters with young stars-to-be like Bob Dylan, Tom Paxton, Phil Ochs, and Joni Mitchell, as well as older luminaries like Reverend Gary Davis, Mississippi John Hurt, and Odetta. Colorful, hilarious, and engaging, *The Mayor of MacDougal Street* is a feast for anyone interested in the music, politics, and spirit of a revolutionary period in American culture

## **The Mayor of MacDougal Street Details**

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## From Reader Review The Mayor of MacDougal Street for online ebook

### Buzz says

Couldn't put it down and immediately went on a Dave Van Ronk, Great Folk Scare music binge upon completion. Another fun social history. Van Ronk rules. Vive l'anarchie!

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### Barbara says

I really enjoyed the inside story of Greenwich Village in the late 50's and 60's. Dave Van Ronk was there, and met "everybody" in the music scene. I learned a lot I never knew, particularly about the conflict between the clean cut "folk singers" and the scruffy, more authentic singers like Van Ronk. He also goes into a lot of detail about the transition from singing old or folk songs, including the blues, and singer songwriters like Joni Mitchell. This memoir was written near the end of his life, and could have been more extensive if he had had the time to write more or another book.

I listened to the audiobook and although the narrator was competent, I felt his voice was too mellow and nice for the memoir.

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### Bill Kerwin says

The Coen brothers stole his songs for *Llewyn Davis*, but Dave Van Ronk is more than that twerpy little fictional distortion. No other single performer embodies the spirit of the mid-sixties folk revival as perfectly as Van Ronk: its generosity, its respect for tradition, its openness to change.

Dave Van Ronk was a native New Yorker who lived in the Village from the early 50's until his death in 2002. He played trad jazz during the decline of the card-carrying protest singers of the Seeger generation, began his solo gigs during the rise of the slicker professionals, the Oscar Brands and Theodore Bickels, and began making his mark in the burgeoning folk scene during the late fifties.

These were the early days of the folk revival, when--inspired by the authentic sounds of Harry Smith's 1952 anthology--a host of local college-age enthusiasts, talented but with few opportunities for work, congregated in Washington Square Park and the Folklore Center on McDougal and began to build a movement.

Soon after, a more ambitious crowd of young people from all over the U.S. and Canada (Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs, Joanie Mitchell, etc.) started working in the new clubs like the Gaslight, and the movement grew in professionalism and sophistication. Then Dylan hit big, and everything changed.

This book is not an autobiography. It is Van Ronk's memoir of his involvement in the Village music scene. He says little about his mother or his ex-wife Terri Thal (manager of Dylan, Tom Paxton, and Van Ronk himself), for example, but he shares his own theories about folk music, relates a lot of good stories about musicians (including his encounters with roots artists like the Reverend Gary Davis and Mississippi John Hurt), spins a few good yarns about left-wing politics (Dave was an anarchist), and makes it clear why

everybody he knew loathed the "beatniks" (not to be confused with "the beats," who were writers and musicians). He also speaks of the changes at the end of the sixties that made him temporarily bitter (yes, Bob Dylan comes in for a mention here), but he also demonstrates an overarching gratitude for his good fortune, for the gift of being at the center of a scene where so many good musical things were happening.

This is a moving and entertaining book, particularly for the way it reveals the personality of Van Ronk: his self-taught erudition, his wit, his energy, his enthusiasm, and--above all--his generosity. Co-author Elijah Wald--a fine music critic--has here produced a small volume worthy of Samuel Johnson's biographer Thomas Boswell, and he has done so without Boswell's considerable advantage of being able to follow his subject, with notebook in hand, off and on, for a score of years. True, Wald had some tapes recorded by Dave in anticipation of their collaboration, but the tapes themselves may have been few, for Dave succumbed to cancer soon after the book became an actual joint project instead of a mere shared dream.

But the good news is that Wald had been Dave's guitar student for years, and had deliberately scheduled Dave's last appointment of the day for his lessons, hoping that by doing so he could engage his teacher in longer conversations. It worked: Dave often invited him for dinner, and the many nights he spent sitting at Dave's table, listening to Dave's record collection and treasuring his reminiscences lay the groundwork for what eventually became this marvelous "self-portrait" delivered convincingly in Dave's first-person voice. Occasionally the mask drops (for example, I detect a little more Wald than Dave in the early disquisitions on folk music), but for the most part the voice of Dave Van Ronk, as transmitted by Wald, is a persuasive and loving re-creation.

For those of you who come to this book by way of the Coen Brother's film, know that--although the Coens may have filched a few details of Dave's life and purloined a few of his songs--the cautious, self absorbed, disagreeable Llewyn Davis is the antithesis of the expansive, gregarious Van Ronk. During the folk revival, Dave was a major presence, and, unlike most of the other musicians on the scene, he was married, relatively stable, with regular gigs and an honest-to-god Village apartment. He was an elder brother who routinely reached out to help younger performers. Unlike Llewyn, he didn't sleep on other people's couches: they--including the not-yet-great Dylan--were proud to sleep on his.

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### **Silvio111 says**

I very much appreciated two points that Van Ronk made:

1. To say that a musician who performs songs written by others is "doing covers" demeans the role of interpreter which any performer must fill. The shift from "folksingers" who performed traditional songs of indeterminate authorship to the "singer-songwriter" of the 1960s started this attitude. He notes that no one every accused Sinatra or Louis Armstrong of "doing covers." Van Ronk himself was the ultimate interpreter--skillful, musical, and creative. I am glad he made this point.
2. A performer can be dedicated to political movements and show up frequently to support political change, but this is entirely a different issue than "writing political music." Van Ronk felt that aesthetic quality issues should govern the content of a song, and he did not feel politics "worked" in that sense. He noted his disagreements with Pete Seeger on this issue, but that did not stop him from praising Pete Seeger's musicianship or character.

I agree with others who cited Van Ronk's intelligence: this book is such a pleasure to read; the man is not afraid to state his intelligent opinions side by side with critiques of fellow musicians whom he obviously had

a close and delightful relationship with. An honest, well read, and thoughtful person is always rare to find!

I loved this book and now I must go back and listen to Van Ronk, whom I really have not paid much attention to since the 1970s! My loss, I am sure!

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## Ben says

I picked this book up as homework ahead of seeing the Coen Brothers' new flick, *Inside Llewyn Davis* later this week, a film loosely based on Van Ronk's memoirs. Now, if my memory is trustworthy (which it often is, but in this instance it is a bit fuzzy), I first discovered the music of Van Ronk some years back through my appreciation of the music of Bob Dylan. Van Ronk, nicknamed "the Mayor of MacDougal Street," was influential not only for Dylan but on many artists of the so-called "Great Folk Scare," or the "folk revival" of the 1960s. But, my discovery of Van Ronk may just as well have been through some of Van Ronk's influences -- my admiration for the music of many blues musicians, and in particular the Reverend Gary Davis. The first Van Ronk song that I picked up was on a collection of covers of Reverend Gary Davis songs -- in this case the song was "Soon My Work Will All Be Done," on the tribute album *Gary Davis Style*. Regardless of how I first discovered Van Ronk, I next developed a minor appreciation for his music through an album called *Dave Van Ronk Sings*. But it was not until I first heard of the new Coen Brothers film that I really dived into Van Ronk's musical repertoire, especially cultivating a growing appreciation for much of his later music (from the 1980s and beyond).

I picked up *The Mayor of MacDougal Street* expecting an autobiography, but as Elijah Wald writes in the Afterword, "Dave never considered this an autobiography." Rather the "primary intention" was to give a "representation of Dave's memories and opinions about the 'Great Folk Scare.'" Though the work was ultimately finished by Wald, as Van Ronk passed before seeing this work to its end, it does paint an interesting picture of these early and mercurial years, filled with humorous anecdotes, engaging commentary on music and politics and fascinating descriptions of many giants and "first-rate second-rate" figures from this era, including Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Mississippi John Hurt, Reverend Gary Davis and Phil Ochs, among others.

I often found the footnotes the most enjoyable part of the book, and I wished that some parts were expanded (his friendship with Dylan or Tom Paxton, for instance) while also feeling that other parts should have been condensed, but overall I found it an enjoyable read, even if it didn't leave me completely satisfied. The stories about Gary Davis (to whom an entire chapter is devoted) were some of my favorites. I enjoyed his political discourse in the third chapter. And, most of all, I enjoyed learning about Van Ronk's musical roots and his serendipitous journey to folk music. I always had thought of Van Ronk as a folk or blues singer, but his roots were really in traditional jazz -- he was just born too late to become a great trad jazz musician. And although I enjoy many of Van Ronk's jazz albums, as a fan of some of the music he's best known for, I'm sort of glad -- for myself at least -- that things worked out as they did.

This book is a wonderful read for any fans of Van Ronk's music, or of the 60s New York folk scene in general. It is a portrait of a time when change was stirring in the wind, when big things were happening and when the old traditions of music greats like Mississippi John Hurt, Gary Davis and Muddy Waters were blending with the new. And I can't help but agree with Van Ronk that the musicians of this period were not necessarily any better than those of today, but the social conditions of the period were forever changing and the musicians were caught up in this revolutionary time when everything, including the music world was changing forever -- creating resentments for some and catapulting others to stardom. Van Ronk was never a

big star, despite his prominence in this little folk community of the late-1950s and early-1960s, but he was a great musical interpreter and, it seems from this book, a good-humored, well-read and witty man to boot. I am now more excited than ever to see the new Coen Brothers film, and as a fan of their previous work (and from what I've heard of the movie so far) I don't expect to be disappointed.

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### **Lisa says**

Reading it felt somewhat like sitting down for coffees and cigarettes with Van Ronk and listening to him talk about the old days. He spent years involved in anarchist politics, tells jokes that your Dad might tell\*, interchanges Latin with merchant marine slang, and has inside gossip on nearly everyone playing folk music sometime from about 1955 onwards in Greenwich Village. All this to say he's a unique and intelligent voice.

At times I felt he was forcing objectivity, perhaps to avoid criticism that he's just bitter he didn't 'make it'. Maybe I was looking too hard. I thought the Dylan passages were awkward. He knew Dylan well -- Dylan spent a lot of time on his couch when first in NYC and Van Ronk's first wife was Dylan's first manager -- and Van Ronk seems to know people will want to hear about him. But while he doles out some compliments, he doesn't seem to care for him as a person at all, and describes Dylan at the moment of their falling-out telling Van Ronk what he should do to make it as a star.

This book is lovely when Van Ronk talks about music and the evolution of music. His thoughts on the interaction between trad jazz, folk and blues, on political folk, on Dylan's transition away from folk music, and on musicians like Reverend Gary Davis all make the book worth reading.

\*"...they would be over by the Sullivan Street side of the square, singing 'Hava Nagilah.' Footnote: Have another nagilah. Have two nagilahs, they're small."

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### **Seth says**

An easy five stars. This is one highly entertaining book. And not just entertaining. He has many many interesting things to say about the relationship between politics and folk music, and different strands of folk music. It is so nice to read such a detailed account of what was going on in the 56-61 period, before Dylan showed up. Van Ronk himself was a highly interesting character. I've enjoyed his music for a long time, but it was always clear that he was coming from a somewhat different place than many of the others, and it was interesting to read his background and how he ended up doing what he did.

I thoroughly enjoyed his many attacks on The Kingston Trio and their ilk, which runs like an ongoing theme throughout the book. For example (footnote, p. 165):"Some of the musicians from the commercial groups used to defend their maiming of the music by telling me that they were opening up a new audience, and if it weren't for

them, no one would know about people like me. To some extent they were probably right about that, but I suspect

that they also drove a lot of people away by making the word "folk" synonymous with the insipid, cutesy crap they  
were peddling."

A great book.

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### **Dan Downing says**

This may not be a 5 Star book for most people, but as usual I have rated it according to its merits in its own category. In this case the category is "Dave Van Ronk and his music, friends and stories". Outside that category I'd probably give it 5 Stars.

Last year when those sadistic evil Coen Brothers came out with their satire on 'Folk Music', the publicity claimed it was a history of folk music in Greenwich Village in the late 50s, loosely based on the life of Dave Van Ronk. Fair enough. They called the movie "Inside Llewyn Davis" and I enjoyed it very much. At the same time Van Ronk got some press and The Smithsonian issued a three volume collection of his work that I gobbled up and also enjoy very much. And I found out about this book. It has been waiting for me and I for it. How it escaped me for nine years I don't know; once I had my hands on it I waited some more, like saving frosting on cake to the end.

Suffice it to say that Van Ronk and Wald give us a terrific view, full of characters and honesty, of an extraordinary life. Many laugh out loud episodes, starting with the first line "Back at Our Lady of Perpetual Bingo...." which leads into a vignette from grade school which pretty much sums up Dave's life. Students of history, music, humor and life can find a lot to like here.

Highly Recommended.

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### **Steve says**

Reading Dylan's "Chronicles", where Van Ronk is often mentioned, I realized I had his autobio as well. Dave passed before the final edit, but music journalist Elijah Wald has done an excellent job pulling this all together.

A self-educated high school drop out and admitted Leftist, Van Ronk has obviously thought about the whole "Folk Scare" event of the '50's and '60's. He has many great stories, but he also has a whole chapter on Left Wing political groups in '50's NYC and how they were attached to different types of folk music.

With a short fuse for BS Van Ronk never stops from telling the truth - or at least the truth as he sees it. Great memoir of that whole scene, especially since it does not just tell about events, but also provides a critical reading of them as well.

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### **Art says**

Four and a half stars. An insider, behind-the-scenes memoir of the Greenwich Village folk music scene. Dave Van Ronk, raconteur — Dave Van Raconteur — tells story after story about his involvement and observations from the fifties through the sixties. Most of the book takes place during the exciting period before Dylan arrived and the money flowed, a period when those in the Village felt that something would take off.

If you like music, you will like this book. Dave, a finger-style guitarist, describes the history, common threads and differences among blues, jazz and folk music. An intriguing thread: Who owns what when it

comes to traditional songs and field recordings? You can copyright a song but not an arrangement.

Dave died in 2002, Elijah Wald worked with Dave then finished the book after he died. Elijah wove all the anecdotes, interviews and scraps into an interesting book. Elijah Wald's quality work here turned me onto his other books. I'll read one or two of those over time.

The Coen Brothers bought the options on this book for their film "Inside Llewyn Davis," which opened in many cities <http://www.landmarktheatres.com/Films....> Llewyn Davis is not Dave Van Ronk, although some scenes come from the book. Good atmospherics of cafes and nightclubs.

An employer, in 1981, took me/us to see Dave Van Ronk at a cafe. ... A busload of us from my high school took a field trip to New York City in 1965. We made a stop in Greenwich Village, going to a club halfway below street level. I remember candles on little round tables facing a dark stage. We ordered soft drinks.

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### **Curt Hopkins Hopkins says**

The single best book I've ever read by a musician. Van Ronk's intellect, which was estimable and largely earned through independent reading and conversation, his musical knowledge and skill, his black humor and sense of language all shone through. You don't have to give a rat's ass about folk music or the "Folk Scare" to get a lot out of this book. Here's a guy who LIVED his entire life. He was the "whole man" that Celine and Miller were looking for. He even made leftist politics understandable in their historical context (though I appreciate he seemed more of an anarchist than a leftist). He ties his music into its historical context and knows why he did what he did.

Wald as co-writer/editor was instrumental in making a book whose subject died before he could write the book he meant to into a sleek, seamless memoir.

If you are a fan (I've sang "Chicken is nice" and "Good old wagon" for no good reason since I first heard them 15 years ago) the book will add depth to the music and songs you've already heard.

Oh, and he also talks about Utah Phillips, Bob Dylan, Tom Paxton, Joani Mitchell, Rev. Gary Davis, Joan Baez, Mississippi John Hurt, Brownie McGhee and Sunny Terry.

Jesus. Reading the book - honest to G-d - felt almost like an honor.

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### **Henry Sturcke says**

While we can be happy to have this book at all, it's a shame Van Ronk didn't live to see it through to completion. The loss is softened by two factors: the devotion of co-author Elijah Wald to the task of finishing it, and the fact that Van Ronk was a world-class raconteur, and many of his finely-honed anecdotes were preserved on concert tapes.

Nevertheless, it would have been good to have more of his well-founded takes on the musicians and other characters who populated Greenwich Village, since he was a long-term fixture there. He brings both critical acumen and nostalgic affection to his judgments.

Van Ronk was on the scene almost before there was a scene, and stayed on long after the scene had departed,

remaining long enough to serve as generous godfather and mentor to the second wave of singer-songwriters who began to show up in the 80s. Anyone who met him, and there were many of us through the years, treasures the memory.

An unreconstructed Marxist, he came by his politics honestly, spending more time in the school of hard knocks than in any schoolhouse. Again, he was there before the trust-fund radicals of the late sixties, and was still there long after they had become dentists and stock brokers, an observation that bemuses, but doesn't embitter him.

He's also remarkably free of bitterness that Dylan preempted him by putting Van Ronk's arrangement of The House of the Rising Sun on his debut lp, just as Van Ronk was readying himself for his next recording session. Its distinctive descending chromatic baseline, the heart of his reading, was in turn lifted by the Animals for their first U.S. hit.

Nearly as famous is his finger-picked arrangement of Cocaine, but in Jackson Browne's recording. Browne, careful to avoid repeating Dylan's gaffe, offered to credit him with the copyright, but Van Ronk directed him to the estate of Rev. Gary Davis, from whom he had learned the song.

That anecdote alone says much about the man. His story was not rags to riches, but rags to ragtime, blues and folk. Now that the Coen Brothers have credited this book as the inspiration for their latest movie, I'm happy that he is getting posthumous recognition. Anyone interested in the music and politics of the fifties and sixties will enjoy reading the book, and will forgive it for not being the book it could have been if he had lived just a little longer.

One quibble: the name of singer-songwriter Eric Andersen is consistently misspelled. Da Capo: fix it please!

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### **Paul Bryant says**

To use Dave Van Ronk's own classification system, Dave Van Ronk was somewhere near the top of the second division of American urban folkies, I never bothered to listen to him at all. But if you're at all interested in the FOLK thing he's always on the radar, always. So this book looked like it would be (and it was too) fun – for a folk fan. Which is me. Might not be you. You might think suburban white twentysomething males doing imitations of work songs collected from old black guys is something you don't want to be bothering with, all that straining for authenticity whilst actually BEING as inauthentic as possible – what was that thing Jesus said? Thou hypocrite, cast out first the beam out of thine own eye, and then shalt thou see clearly to pull out the mote that is in thy brother's eye. Oh yeah, that was it. There are wonderful debates about authenticity which have been had\* and some of them are rehearsed here again. In fact ALL the old debates are replayed in Dave's cut-the-crap straight talkin' straight talk. (This book is a whole series of interviews stitched together.)

Dave informs us that in the 50s folk music was a teeny tiny splinter group before the big folk boom of the very late 50s to mid 60s but even this teeny group was subdivided into hostile sects – the revivalists who tried to replicate the old 78s to the last nuance; the blues freaks, the old timey/bluegrass crowd; the academic folkies who preceded every song with the 1954 equivalent of a Powerpoint presentation about Appalachian kinship systems; the cabaret folkies like Josh White (despised!); and the political gang who sneered at all of the above because they weren't political. This sub-sub-sub sect was of course majorly fissiparous itself – Stalinists, Trotskyists, anarchists – they were singing the old union stuff from the 30s and wouldn't have given Mississippi John Hurt the time of day. Frankie and Johnny? Which side were *they* on? DVR is very droll about all of this stuff, and I did appreciate that although he was a hard-line Trot, he didn't sing political songs because he knew that "Way Down in Lubyanka Prison" was not any good and would not be something people wanted to hear in two weeks time.

I also appreciated his rant about how any new song accompanied by acoustic instruments was automatically folk, when it really wasn't. You can see the metamorphosis from folk to not folk very clearly in Dylan's stuff – first actual folk stuff (Sally Gal, House Carpenter), then own words plus folk tunes (Masters of War, Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall), then own words and own tune (Mr Tambourine Man, It's all Over Now Baby Blue) – it's like that philosophical question – if I lend you my hammer and you replace the handle on my hammer it's still my hammer, but what if you replace the head on the hammer too? – now it's your hammer - no, er wait. If I had my hammer I'd hammer out a warning. So Mr Tambourine Man is NOT FOLK. However true that may be it's useless. It's like Burma – they renamed it Myanmar but everyone still calls it Burma. You can't fight the collective ignorance of the press and the desperate need to stick music into categories which the marketing guys say is necessary because how otherwise will the idiot punters find it? For instance Richard Thompson is a guy who makes blazing rock music and has done for 30 years but he's labelled FOLK because he played folk when he was 20. What's the difference between Leadbelly and Suzanne Vega? None, they're both folk. Folk may as well be called klof for all the sense the name makes. However, up with this we must put, as Churchill once said between sets at the Café Wha.

Who wrote it and who stole what from who is another fruitful source of bad vibrations in the klof world. Along with where's the money – that's a theme which unites all musician memoirs (see *X-Ray* by Ray Davies, although I don't recommend you do). Those two plus *we were so stoned it was the best ten year party ever* makes up a considerable portion of these reminiscences. The best bits are where Dave allows himself some anecdotes about actual people I've heard of. (He drops a zillion names I haven't ever heard of. I could imagine even their ex-wives haven't heard of some of these guys.) But for sure, this book gives a solid insider view of one of the vital locations of American musical genius. Three solid stars. Good ole Dave.

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\* such as *Faking It* by Barker and Taylor

### Allan says

I'm not a fan of the music that Dave Van Ronk played, nor indeed had I heard much about him until the Coen Brothers' 'Inside Llewyn Davis' was released last year (the film is based partly on Van Ronk's story), but I do enjoy a music memoir, so when I saw it on BOGO via Audible, I decided to buy it.

Van Ronk was part of the music scene in NYC from the 1950s, moving to Greenwich Village in stages from his home in Queens, and becoming part of the jazz scene, before through necessity (the jazz scene having died a death) turning to folk and blues, which exploded into re mainstream in the early 60s.

The original purpose of the memoir, finished by Elijah Wald after Van Ronk's death from cancer in 2002, was to tell the story of the years of this folk scare in the 1960s rather than to tell the story of Van Ronk's entire life, and as a result, we get the musician's take on the rise of the genre in the mainstream, with his partial success as a result. Dylan once had the aim of 'being a big as Van Ronk', and the relationship between the two men is narrated, though not at the expense of anecdotes about other relationships.

I read at the time of the Coen Brothers movie that those close to Van Ronk during his life were annoyed at the allusion that Llewyn Davis was Van Ronk, given that the character in the film was pretty unsympathetic, and while some strands from the book were lifted into the movie, one can understand their point of view. Van Ronk does on occasion come off a little bitterly, but given the success of some of his contemporaries in

relation to himself, is pretty philosophical, happy that he was able to live his life as a musician.

An entertaining music memoir that I'd recommend checking out!

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### **Tom Walsh says**

Van Ronk, to me, was a great blues singer, a gifted guitarist and, from his interviews, a man with a great sense of honest and funny humor. This book brings him back to us, along with the entire canvas of 1950s-60s New York of the beats. Ah, as he explains, not the "beatniks" who were commercial, but the beats, who were intelligent, well-read, talented and anti-everything. Van Ronk never made that "big time" because he hated bourgeois culture, and was honest and true to his music. While others successfully made the change from grunge and poetry to clean and harmonic commercial sounds, Van Ronk stuck to his artistic guns. He helped so many singers, and this, I think, was his greatest quality. Dylan had a place to sleep in Van Ronk's home anytime. He encouraged our Bob in many ways. If you want to find more info, his mp3 albums are on Amazon.

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