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Bob Dylan's Early Days in New York

By John Leland

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"It's kind of a long story," Ted Russell said the other day, in a voice that seemed to mean it. In 1961, Mr. Russell, who was then a freelance photographer, got a call from a publicist at Columbia Records about an unusual young folk singer the label had just signed. According to the publicist, the singer "was riding freight trains and that kind of stuff," Mr. Russell, 87, said from his home in Forest Hills, Queens. "Had a hobo lifestyle."

He was Bob Dylan.

The publicist invited Mr. Russell to a gig at Gerde's Folk City in Greenwich Village and gave him some demo records by Mr. Dylan. "I knew absolutely nothing about folk or folk music," Mr. Russell admitted. "I was at the time, and still am, something of a jazz aficionado, and I was hanging out in jazz clubs. My speed was Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday."

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Still, he said, it seemed like a promising story. He photographed the 20-year-old singer performing at the club and then, a few days later, at Mr. Dylan's apartment on West 4th Street with his girlfriend, Suze Rotolo. Mr. Dylan had just received a glowing review in The New York Times. Mr. Russell pitched the story to Life magazine.

"I wanted to do an essay on the trials and tribulations of an up-and-coming folk singer trying to make it in the big city," he said. "They gave me a big yawn, not the slightest interest."

Instead, he went to the Saturday Evening Post, where the editors were intrigued. "There were a bunch of them sitting around the big oak table in the conference room, and they were all very interested and excited about the whole thing, after they looked at the pictures and saw what he looked like and how he dressed," Mr. Russell recalled. "And they said, 'Play the records.' When I put on the first record, they looked very dismayed. They said to me, 'Are you playing it at the right speed?' I tried it on 33, and then I tried it on 45, and they didn't like that, either. Then I tried it on 78, and it sounded like the Chipmunks. They said no, they turned it down."

The photos went into a file drawer. Mr. Russell went to Europe on other assignments. He photographed Mr. Dylan twice more, for Life in 1963 and 1964. By then Mr. Dylan was a star, but Mr. Russell still did not think much about him. The 1961 shots remained unseen for more than 30 years, until the Sygma agency started distributing them.

They are now available in a book published by Rizzoli and an exhibition at the Steven Kasher Gallery in Chelsea starting April 20. The early pictures show Dylan aware of the camera but pretending not to be, in the same way he had made up stories about riding the rails. By the 1964 images, which Mr. Russell made while Mr. Dylan was being interviewed by a Life reporter, the singer gave up the pretense. He made the pose part of his pose.

What was he like back then? Mr. Russell said he did not know.

"I can't tell you much about it because my style of shooting is to be a fly on the wall," he said. "In the tradition of Henri Cartier-Bresson, I want to be an observer, not a participant. I told them to pretend I'm not here, just ignore me, and that's exactly what they did. So there was virtually no conversation.

"When I'm looking through the viewfinder, I'm oblivious to anything else. I didn't hear it, I wasn't interested. My job was to keep my mouth shut and my eyes open, which is what I did. So I can't tell you anything about him, really. If you gave me a million dollars right now, I couldn't remember one word that was between us."

He never did become a Dylan fan.