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Photos: A Disarmingly Happy Bob Dylan Inside His First NYC Apartment

By Ben Yakas

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We can all conjure up an image of our ideal Bob Dylan: the austere protest singer in a knit cap, the surreal poet with the wild hair, the buttoned-up family man living in the country, the scarecrow-like figure wandering through the '80s with bad bandanas and worse makeup, or maybe the irascible troubadour with a Clark Gable mustache living out his glory years on a never-ending tour of the globe. But there's one Dylan the public has rarely gotten the chance to absorb: the doughy, fresh-faced kid from Duluth, Minnesota who was equal parts goofy and graceful.

It's that Dylan who is the subject of Ted Russell: Bob Dylan NYC 1961-1964, a new show opening this week at the Steven Kasher Gallery in Chelsea. It's an exhibition of exceptionally early photographs of the legendary singer at the age of 20 before he blew up. You'll see him inside his first NYC apartment at 161 W. 4th Street—holding groceries, hanging with girlfriend Suze Rotolo, writing on his typewriter—and performing at local clubs such as Gerde's Folk City.

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Ted Russell was a young photographer who had a few pictures published in LIFE when he learned about the newcomer Dylan. "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," Russell told the NY Times. "[The LIFE editors] gave me a big yawn, not the slightest interest." Despite the lack of interest in that shoot, Russell ended up shooting Dylan twice more in 1963 and 1964, when he was already a star.

Here's a description of the 1961 photos, which sat unseen in a file drawer for more than 30 years—from the gallery:

In this 1961 set Dylan is adolescent, smooth, relaxed. He pretends to be unaware of the camera, but clearly basks in its gaze. On stage and off, he is a performer, a charmer of great suavity. He plays guitar and harmonica on stage, and on and off the mattress on the apartment floor. He takes his glasses on and off. He fiddles with Rotolo, who the camera also loves. The apartment is full of endearing personal effects: a wicker trimmed phonograph, a stuffed beagle, wine bottles on the floor, a framed reproduction of Roualt's "The Old King".

If you want to see more classic Dylan photos, check out a few of our interviews with photographer Rowland Scherman, who shot Dylan at the Newport Folk Festival in 1963, at the March On Washington that same year, and in 1966 during his legendary electric tour with The Hawks (which was later used as the Grammy-winning cover of Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits).

"Ted Russell: Bob Dylan NYC 1961-1964" will be on view April 20th - June 3rd, 2017. Steven Kasher Gallery is located at 515 W. 26th Street, New York, NY 10001. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.