

The Village Trip: New Festival Shines Light on Undervalued Greenwich Village Music History

This Sept. 27-30, The Village Trip -- a new festival taking place in in Manhattan's Greenwich Village -- will shine a light on a neighborhood whose artistic and historical riches are as curious and...

By [Joe Lynch](#)



The famous triumphal arch in the Washington Square in the Greenwich village in Manhattan, New York. Didier Marti/Getty Images

This weekend (Sept. 27-30) in Manhattan's Greenwich Village, a new festival entitled [The Village Trip](#) will shine a light on a neighborhood whose artistic and historical riches are as curious and circuitous as its winding, brick-laden streets. And while a number of boutique [festivals](#) have popped up in New York City over the last few years, this one comes from an unlikely source – a British journalist living a full ocean away.

Liz Thomson, a London-based journalist, has nurtured a lifelong interest in Greenwich Village. “Baez was my gateway drug,” says the Village Trip co-founder/executive producer of her interest in the '60s New York folk revival, a fertile scene of music and protest that involved a post-blacklist Pete Seeger, a pre-fame Bob Dylan and a lot of acoustic guitars. Falling for [Joan Baez, Vol. 2](#) and learning guitar as a kid, Thomson's passion for music

continued throughout college (she earned a music degree) and into her journalism career (one of her first gigs was interviewing Leonard Cohen in the '80s prior to his comeback).

Fast-forward to 1995. Thomson is a working reporter and she gets an offer from U.K. publication [Mojo](#) to visit the neighborhood that captured her imagination as a teen. The reason, coincidentally, is Joan Baez, then in the midst of recording an album in the storied (but now-shuttered) Greenwich venue The Bottom Line. [Mojo](#) wanted her to cover the [Rings](#) [Them Bells](#) sessions, and she only too happily agreed.

Once her affection for the neighborhood crossed over from her mind's eye to the real world, Thomson didn't look back. She's spent approximately two weeks of the last 20 years in the Washington Square Hotel, and eventually — fueled by the idea that the area wasn't getting its proper due from the wider community — she began plotting a festival that would celebrate the history and heritage of Greenwich.

“It's an odd obsession and passion — my [British] friends think I'm nuts,” Thomson, seated in the tastefully lush lounge of the Washington Square Hotel, says with a chuckle. (That [hotel](#), where “California Dreamin'” was written and Dylan and Baez lived in 1964, is fittingly the festival's founding partner.)

“Perhaps I have a romantic idea of what the Village is, but if this were the U.K., we would have had a festival here to celebrate this [area and history] — and it doesn't need to be cliché and commercial.”

With no Americans lining up for the job, Thomson took it upon herself to push the concept of the festival into reality. After many transatlantic flights, more of her personal money than she intended, [a number of partnerships](#) with local institutions and the efforts of executive director Liz Law and event producer Danny Kapilian, Thomson's long-gestating dream comes to life this weekend. The Village Trip kicks off Thursday (Sept. 27) with an opening reception boasting work from music photographer David Gahr and music from composer/jazz poetry pioneer David Amran (one of Jack Kerouac's old pals); Friday sees a walking tour highlighting playwright Eugene O'Neill; Saturday brings the focus back to the long-running Village jazz scene with an event at the New School, and a live concert from Suzanne Vega, Martha Redbone and VickiKristinaBarcelona in Washington Square Park under the arch; Sunday, the festival closes at iconic venue The Bitter End with a folk hootenanny courtesy Happy Traum, Tom Chapin and the Chapin Sisters, David Massengill and Diana Jones.

All this, mind you, traces back to someone who lives an ocean away. But in many ways, it's not surprising: Thomson is the latest in a long line of Brits who've taken it upon themselves remind Americans of our own history, particularly with regards to music (in the '60s, British interest reignited American appreciation for blues masters and rock n' roll pioneers).

While most New Yorkers are vaguely familiar with Greenwich Village's history as the cradle of the leftie folk movement, Thomson can hold court on the area's importance to theater, literature, photography, social justice, feminism, the LGBTQ community and beyond — and with enough detail to put most locals to shame. She can rattle off where in Greenwich Bob Dylan first tested “Masters of War” (Kettle of Fish), how the 1961 folk-filled Beatnik Riot helped kick off the free speech movement, when Walt Whitman visited

the area's "fairy dens," how the birth control movement has roots in this neighborhood, and more.

"So much started here," she says. "It's always been a Mecca for alternatives."

One might point out that, hey, this is New York City — most Manhattan neighborhoods have a list of historical happenings on their Wikipedia page. But unlike many neighborhoods on the island, Greenwich has resisted change, retaining the architecture, DIY creativity and sense of intellectual/artistic community that has been aggressively wiped out of most Manhattan 'hoods.

And these Village places could always use more love. Many of the NYC transplants who bemoan CBGB closing rarely, if ever, take advantage of live music in places like the Bitter End or the Village Vanguard, which are just as steeped in music history. And unlike that beloved punk venue, these ones are still kicking, providing a vital, living link to the city's musical past in present day NYC.

"If everyone's not careful the wrecking ball will swing and it'll be an area of expensive condos," Thomson opines. "We need to conserve it and be aware of what we have."

Maybe with the Village Trip kicking off this weekend – and Thomson's hopes that it will merely be the inaugural edition of a festival that could expand in coming years to include fringe events and attract international interest — more New Yorkers will appreciate the history stacked under our noses.