

Was Dylan Thomas the first rock 'n' roll poet?

Once upon a time in America

This is Greenwich Village in Manhattan, where Dylan Thomas forged his reputation as a rock 'n' roll poet.

Dylan toured the US four times, giving poetry and prose readings. This small-town poet, used to the pubs of Swansea and London, was greeted in America like a superstar.

He was a regular in the Village's many bars during his visits here to New York. Like many actors, writers and musicians on the East Coast, he was drawn here because of the theatres and the galleries and the music venues, but also the creative vibrancy and its unique, bohemian spirit

The Beat Generation artists and writers flocked here later in the 1950s. Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix and the Velvet Underground all played some of their first ever shows here, and it was where the East Coast counterculture movement really got underway.

Dylan Thomas worked hard and played hard. He recorded his poetry, finished and premiered *Under Milk Wood*, and also partied, had affairs and drank. But it all caught up with him.

This was Dylan's regular watering hole during his final US visit. Returning from the Tavern in the early hours to his hotel one night, he declared: "I've had 18 straight whiskies. I think that's the record."

At the time Dylan was staying at the infamous Hotel Chelsea, a few blocks north of the Village. The hotel was another haven for creative and eccentric guests, who in later years included Madonna, Iggy Pop, Leonard Cohen, Sid Vicious and Patti Smith.

At the Chelsea, Dylan's health rapidly declined and he lost consciousness, never to recover. A dose of morphine administered by his doctor may have sealed his fate.

Were he a musician, Dylan Thomas's death from drink and drugs would have become the stuff of rock 'n' roll legend. The living fast and dying young, the touring, the womanising and hell-raising: is this why so many musicians continue to cite him as an inspiration?