

## Christine Lavin's memoir makes for a true folk tale



Christine Lavin gives a shout-out to Boston, but her story is built around her many musical adventures in New York.

By [Steve Morse](#)

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Be careful about meeting Christine Lavin. She might write a song about you. Others have inspired the lyrics of such one-of-a-kind tunes as “Sweet Irene the Disco Queen,” “Sensitive New Age Guys,” or her signature “Good Thing He Can’t Read My Mind.”

### **COLD PIZZA FOR BREAKFAST:**

#### **A Mem-Wha?**

By Christine Lavin

Tell Me Press, 405 pp., \$21.95

Lavin is a folkie’s folkie. Fellow singer Janis Ian has referred to her as “the unsung heroine of the latter-day folk movement.” She’s that and more in this lively new memoir that pays tribute to the New York scene that spawned her (she learned guitar from Greenwich Village legend Dave Van Ronk) and to the audiences that have followed her through a solo career as well as through the slyly outre band the Four Bitchin’ Babes.

A lovable eccentric, Lavin seems to know everyone in the music biz. She met Bob Dylan (teaching him Pete Seeger's new verse to Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land") and is an encyclopedia of folk artists big and small. She grew up as one of nine children in upstate New York, then apprenticed at Caffè Lena in Saratoga Springs, a classic room where Dylan played his first out-of-town show. Along the way, Lavin's path was often rocky — she claims to have been cheated out of \$12,000 by an agent — and she fought tooth and nail with an early record label about reimbursement. But she emerged as feisty as ever.

Lavin's "Cold Pizza for Breakfast" (the title comes from one of her songs) starts slowly as she gets bogged down in details of her early childhood, but builds appreciably when she chooses music over a nursing career and moves to New York City.

Her adventures are many, from turning down a pickup attempt from Beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti to befriending countless musicians at open-mike jams at Birdland in the city. She indulges her eccentricities by seeking out Barry Humphries, who plays the comedic character Dame Edna, seeing his Broadway show 28 times. She also becomes friends with the sharp octogenarian Ervin Drake, who wrote "It Was a Very Good Year," covered most famously by Frank Sinatra.

If there's a happening, Lavin tends to be at it, whether it's a post-9/11 benefit concert or mingling with John Lennon fans at the Dakota. Lavin's text could have used more editing — some of her stories tend to run on a bit — but she has a great sense of discovery and unbridled joy that saves her even while bombing at various gigs, such as opening for Joan Rivers in Florida (her song "Bald Headed Men" didn't go over well with toupee-wearing members of the crowd).

She praises Boston (thanking folk-oriented station WUMB for playing her records), but everything pales next to her New York fascination. She brings not just the artists but various regular people alive, including a photo-shop owner who was so helpful to artists that when he moved away, Yoko Ono gave him a \$10,000 check of thanks. "I know that people like to criticize Yoko," Lavin writes, "but that one kind act speaks volumes."

Lavin is a bit of a smart aleck — witness her album titles "Future Fossils" and "Happydance of the Xenophobe" but we always find ourselves pulling for her because of her indomitable spirit. In the memoir's afterword she cheekily states, "If you can buy only one book this year, please buy mine." She may not be the biggest name in folk music, but few artists can write about it with such enduring wit.

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