

THE LIFE AND WORK OF BOB DYLAN

Deep within the walls of La Salle University's Connelly Library, a voice waits to be studied. Bob Dylan, the rock-and-roll poet/legend/icon, is the subject of a one-of-a-kind archive in the form of books, scholarly papers, doctoral dissertations, compact discs, records, tapes, videos, and even t-shirts and ticket stubs.

"Academic institutions traditionally haven't collected the works and biographical material of Bob Dylan or, for that matter, any other contemporary 'popular music' artists," said La Salle's Library and Special Collections Director John Baky. "Academic libraries and rare book collections are by their nature conservative and therefore cautious in collecting contemporary works, and fearful of investing in arcane subjects that might prove to be transient." Baky believes that academic libraries should provide the resources necessary for studying contemporary phenomena when they are of unavoidable influence within the culture. Bob Dylan and what he represents exemplify this sort of phenomenon, Baky said.



Dylan, known initially for his protest music of the era, became not only an icon among the anti-Vietnam war movement, but also a rock-and-roll innovator, injecting his lyrics with poignant social commentary and raising the bar of the literary trope in rock music.

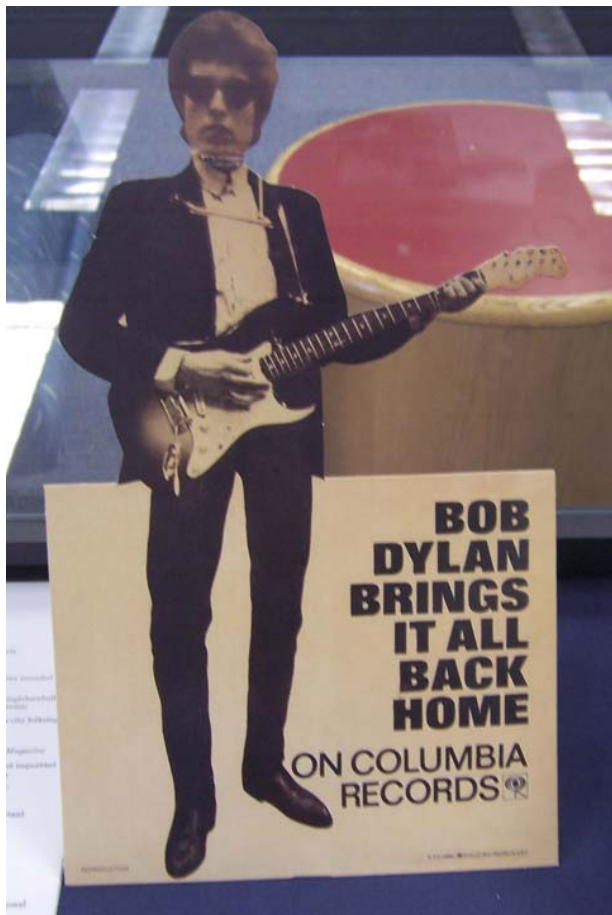
"Besides our own La Salle Students, there is an important amount of interlibrary loan activity revolving around the Dylan Collection," Baky said. The collection contains every album Dylan has released in their various forms--vinyl, cassette, or compact disc--and is consistently updated. There are more than two dozen "bootleg" vinyl records alone. In addition to the music, the collection houses sheet music, ticket stubs, t-shirts, biographies, song analyses, indexed lyrics, secondary sources (interviews, concert reviews, magazines), and multimedia treatments (CD-ROM, DVD, and video).

"The sheer quality of the work warrants the maintenance of the Collection," said Baky, "It transcends the work of other artists by orders of magnitude. Dylan's importance in intellectual terms lies in the fact that he poses endless complex questions without ever offering simple answers. The continuing vitality of this man's writing is unquestionable."

"There is an extraordinary concentration of attention on this artist world wide," Baky said. "There are at least 10 exhaustive and serious magazines, mostly in English, that do nothing but offer comment on Dylan and his concerts. They are 100-plus pages and have been running for years. The level of obsessive detail is breathtaking. Dylan is somehow representative of identity for people and remains a benchmark of American popular culture internationally," he added.

The archive contains exhaustive recordings of Dylan's songs by other artists to document the resonance of his work and its transmuted uses for other generations. The band Ministry is cataloged in the collection right next to Patti Smith and a band called The New Dylans. Also included are "bootleg" records, and include a vast range of performances, including a gig at Philadelphia's Electric Factory six years ago, and a rare 12-record set entitled The Ten of Swords.

Thus, Dylan's son, Jakob, and his band The Wallflowers, take up residence right next to his father's works. "The Wallflowers are important to this collection because of Jakob being Dylan's son, you get a picture of generational perspectives," Baky said. He said father and son seem to go out of their way to avoid comparisons with each other. The younger Dylan has not recorded any of his father's songs.



An English professor from Rutgers University used the archive extensively to construct a proposal to nominate Dylan for the Nobel Prize in Literature. In fact, Dylan has been nominated for a Nobel on four separate occasions. Growing numbers of professional scholars and graduate students have used the material for literary study. A five-minute search of research databases reveals that no fewer than 11 Ph.D. dissertations on Dylan have been defended successfully from schools ranging from Harvard to Berkeley, and University of Toronto to the University of Tennessee--the earliest dated from 1978.

"Important information is lost when institutions hesitate and become too fearful of collecting products of contemporary culture," Baky said. "At La Salle, we're trying to prevent that." The Dylan archive is available not only to students of La Salle University but also to the public for scholarship.

Images taken from an exhibition about Bob Dylan that was on display at the Connelly Library during the 2006 – 2007 school year