

All Along the Ivory Tower

Amateur geeks and scholarly nerds come together to discuss Bob Dylan and his music.

By Kevin Dettmar | July 11, 2019

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Steve Brodner for The Chronicle

As I flew into Tulsa that Thursday morning, "High Water Everywhere" was playing in my mind's ear, the 1929 Charlie Patton song whose title (if little else) Bob Dylan lovingly lifted for a track on his 2001 album *"Love and Theft."* My original flight had been canceled, owing to the storms battering Oklahoma. But the red-eye on which I was rebooked would get me to the

Hyatt Regency with enough time for a brief nap before the opening session of the World of Bob Dylan. From the plane window I peered out — high water everywhere. Thankfully, though, the downtown conference venues were safely perched on high ground, sheltered from the storm.

I'm at best an accidental Dylan scholar. A dozen years ago, give or take, I was invited to edit *The Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan* — an assignment for which I was hardly the obvious choice. But I blithely walked through that open door, and many others that have opened since.

For instance, I remember learning that Dylan had won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2016 when I woke up to a phone filled with interview and writing invitations; apparently the Swedish Academy's press materials had mentioned our book. The

Companion also landed me a position on the advisory board of the Institute for Bob Dylan Studies at the University of Tulsa. The institute was founded when the George Kaiser Family Foundation purchased Dylan's archive for a reported \$15 million to 20 million, bringing the rich trove of manuscripts, audio recordings, and film and video footage to the city where Kaiser was born and raised.

The four-day conference was the first large public event to be hosted by the institute, and it was, by any measure, a resounding success. Organizers had hoped for around 200 attendees; they were forced to cut off registration at 500. I had participated in a Dylan conference once before, one fully "scholarly" in design and tenor; the program and the talks were brilliant. But the Tulsa gathering was something different — something special.

That's reflected by the fact that it can with justice be described as a "gathering." In part, it was a meeting of different "tribes"; in stark opposition to the traditional academic conference, the organizers had invited journalists, artists, and fans, as well as popular-music scholars. For many, the conference served as a kind of IRL meetup for folks who had known one another only from Dylan fan sites, message boards, and Facebook groups.

The majority of the conferees split evenly between two camps — though it's difficult to say just what these camps should be called. "Amateurs" and "professionals"? There's probably something to that distinction, but "amateurism" in this instance doesn't really indicate a disparity in scholarly interest or skill so much as it separates those who were getting paid from those who were paying out of their own pockets. Most uncharitably, to both parties, the division might be described as "geeks" versus "nerds"; more conventionally, I suppose, the participants could tentatively be grouped into "fans" and "scholars."

The distinction is somewhat dubious, of course, but there's something to it. One of the differences between fan and scholar involves the question of intentionality. Fans aspire to have the mind of Bob; scholars, in theory at least, seek rather to assess the achievement of the work, independent from what Dylan thought or said about it, to figure out not what Dylan meant, but what a given song, or album, or performance

does. (Scholars, by the way, refer to him as "Dylan"; fans, none of whom, so far as I could tell, had met him — call him "Bob.") Scholars don't care (or try not to care) about what Dylan thought he was doing, or was trying to do; we tend to hold to a more mysterious, even mystical, understanding of art, believing that the work always exceeds (and often contradicts) the explicit intentions of its maker. "Never trust the teller," in D.H. Lawrence's version; "trust the tale." Whereas fans, by and large, hold to a more mystical understanding of Dylan himself. For the fans, the credibility of an argument hinges on whether it jibes with their sense of what Bob was trying to do. (The evidence for this is often Dylan's notoriously unreliable interviews. Bob says *Blood on the Tracks* isn't about the breakup of his marriage to Sara Lownds? Then it's not. Case closed.) Both camps, when it comes right down to it, are interested in the issue of agency: It's just that fans locate it in Bob himself, whereas scholars try their best to isolate agency, and meaning, in the song/album/performance. (Though the scholars are, almost without exception, fans too ... We're not as immune to Bob's charismatic influence as we'd like to pretend.)

Another distinction that struck me that weekend is that fans' way of seeing, analyzing, and questioning such topics is more detectivelike, more based in fact-finding, whereas scholars cherish the study of ideas. One practical consequence was that we scholars were quickly labeled the pundits, the ideas guys (and more often than not, guys took up the most space). At the coffee break after one of the sessions, I heard a fan ask a scholar, "What do you think is the source of Bob's genius? I realize it's a big question." Big is an understatement: It's also not a question we're used to answering, or well-equipped for.

A final, but crucial, distinction between scholarly and fan interpretation concerns the question of context. Both scholars and fans seemed to eschew reading Dylan's work in some orthodox New Critical fashion — they rejected the notion that Dylan's songs alone were the sacred, self-contained source of interpretable meaning — but they had rather different reasons for doing so. In the academy, of course, there's no love lost for the formalist purity of New Criticism's strict faith in reading the text, the whole text, and nothing but the text. As a form of analysis, it has largely been discredited for obscuring (if not completely ignoring) the historical contexts and power structures

that shape what we read and how. This is not to say that we scholars have given up on close reading (having learned the technique, we can't quit!), but we marshal it in the service of larger political and cultural arguments about the world "outside" the text. The fans, too, spent a lot of time close reading Dylan's texts, pressuring them to surrender their meanings, while also vigilantly attending to the contexts that framed their readings and proved their validity. For them, though, the principal context was what they conceived to be Dylan's own intentions: Getting into the texts was a proxy for getting into Bob's head.

The public image of the Dylan fan, going back a half century, isn't entirely flattering. According to one popular label, these amateurs are "Dylanologists." I'd always understood the term as mildly mocking. As a group, Dylanologists have got a lot to live down. The term was coined in 1969 by A.J. Weberman, called "the king of all Dylan nuts" by *Rolling Stone*, who is best known for his subspecialty, "garbology": He rooted through the trash outside Dylan's Greenwich Village apartment looking for clues to the state of the artist's mind and health, and the "hidden meanings" of his songs. But the fans at the conference wore it as a badge of honor. During her keynote address on "Bob Dylan's Body," the NPR Music critic Ann Powers shouted out a couple of times to "my Dylanologists in the front row" for real-time fact checking, which they gladly (and nonjudgmentally) provided. So, perhaps the moniker's charge depends on who's wielding it, and to what end.

Certainly, I came to the conference in thrall to some of the stereotypes, but they proved impossible to sustain. A rich spirit of intellectual generosity reigned among the Dylan fans; I think all of the scholars were impressed with how unstinting they were with their considerable knowledge. We were also more than a little freaked out by them, truth be told, and even a little envious. It's no secret that academics are routinely beset with professional anxieties, jealousies, and endless self-doubts. The fans, on the other hand, seemed completely untouched by things like "impostor syndrome." But then again, they're not impostors: What they know, they really know.

That's not to say that impostor syndrome is any more justified for academics — we really know our stuff, too. But it says a lot about the kinds of knowledge-sharing communities that we build — and feel like we are able to build — in and outside the professionalized machinery of academia. As a member of the institute's advisory board, I'm ashamed now to say that had I been asked months ago about reaching out to the Dylan fan community, I would have been agin' it. Thank heavens I wasn't asked. The prospect would have triggered visions of Comic-Con; and it's true, there was an awful lot of geeking out (from which the scholars were hardly immune). The event even called forth its own brand of cosplay, though it consisted mostly of tour T-shirts and jackets (the older, obviously, the better). A clutch of five men who had attended high school with one another — during the Johnson or Nixon administrations, I'm going to guess — went everywhere together in matching, custom-made, Dylan-emblazoned varsity baseball jackets. If I hadn't seen but only heard about them, I would have thought them pathetic. But I did see them, bound together through the years by their shared love for Dylan, and the sight was strangely cheering.

I chaired a session composed of one scholar and one fan — the latter, I'd guess, a late 20-something who said I should introduce him as an "independent basement scholar." His talk on the world of Dylan fanzines was remarkable — as was the archive of that ephemera he has assembled, which he makes freely available via PDF to anyone who asks. The spirit of trading Dylan and Grateful Dead bootlegs is alive and well and living on the internet.

And the Dylan fans weren't just generous with one another — they were generous with "us," the scholars. This was especially evident in the give-and-take following talks. At academic conferences, the Q&A can be something of a sadistic ritual. (The only time in our long marriage that I can remember my wife being quite ashamed of me was when she attended a lecture on campus and witnessed me being, apparently, "that guy.") At our worst, scholars have a need to leverage our knowledge; knowing something that others do not offers a tactical advantage. I don't wish to romanticize them, but I can honestly say that I saw nothing of this aggressiveness in the fans. While one suspects that college-aged Dylan fans in the 1960s were the original

mansplainers, the Tulsa Dylan fans seemed singularly uninterested in those "gotcha" moments that are the stuff of scholars' nightmares. I guess if I'm honest, I'd say that for the fans, the point of the conference was Bob; for us scholars, the point was ostensibly the work, the music — but also, well, sort of, us. Our work. Our reputations.

To be fair to my side, there's clearly a very different economy at work in the two camps. The fans weren't there to advance their careers. They weren't interviewing, explicitly or implicitly, for jobs — though the same is increasingly true at academic conferences, both because professional organizations like the Modern Language Association have discouraged using the annual meeting for that purpose, and ... well, because there aren't any jobs.

To be even fairer — and I can only speak for myself here — if I look back at my own conference participation over more than three decades, it's certainly been characterized more by a desire to show what I know than to learn from others. Sometimes, in the talk of a colleague, I'd learn something useful to my own project, of course, and comments during the Q&A might call attention to an objection, or lead to a source, that I hadn't considered. But among the Dylan fans, it seemed to me that together they were creating knowledge. No one owned it — together, they held it in trust.

Occasionally, at least, the fans' generosity rubbed off on us. After the third day of the conference I had reached my limit of enforced sociability. I took a book to a local beer and pizza place, plopped myself down at the bar, and, radiating my best Garbo vibe, hoped to be left alone. Before long, though, someone sat next to me — one of the fans. He seemed to think my name was Kevin Star — which, I have to admit, sounds fabulous. I didn't want to talk to him, but he'd come all the way from New Zealand. He'd only be here for four short days — he had to be back at work on Monday. And he said he liked my paper. We talked, in spite of myself; it was wonderful. I picked up the tab for his dinner.

As should be clear by now — you will have figured it out far more quickly than I did — we scholars could learn a lot from the fans. This is not to suggest that conferences should be transformed into concerts (though I do think Dr. Freud would have

something to say about the way I kept slipping up and calling it a Dylan concert rather than conference). But if we scholars think that fans' analyses are lacking in rigor, our work would surely benefit from a bit of their enthusiasm, even joy.

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