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Dylan 101: He joins the Bard as campus staple Bob Dylan goes to college

Article by: , Star Tribune

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One student wrote his final paper comparing last month's China concerts to 1965's Newport Folk Festival. Another focused on how Hibbing, Duluth and Minneapolis treat his legacy. And another examined Dylan's upbringing with help from her grandfather -- who happens to be the songwriter's cousin.

"I knew a lot about him because of my family connection," said Hayley Stone, one of 20 freshmen in the "Bob Dylan" class at the University of Minnesota. "But I didn't really know just how important a figure he is until now."

Scoff if you're a hater, cheer if you're a fan, and laugh if you're aware of Dylan's stunted stint at the U.

But its Dylan class is one of dozens on Minnesota's most iconic export being taught at colleges ranging from Boston University and Vanderbilt to schools in Norway, Spain and Nova Scotia.

Could the Hibbing native -- who turns 70 Tuesday and is the subject of some 2,000 books -- become a staple of academia alongside Shakespeare, Twain and Mozart?

The thought seems especially ironic at the only school that can claim him as a former student.

Well, sort of claim him. He dropped out after one semester.

"There's no evidence he actually attended a class even once," complained music Prof. Alex Lubet, who teaches the U course.

"I tell students, 'Look what he accomplished without a degree. Now imagine what you can accomplish with one.'"

A fascinating study

As the door to Lubet's class opened for stragglers, the rolling-and-tumbling sounds of "Beyond Here Lies Nothin’" spilled into hallways of Ferguson Hall, where classical music is the norm.

It was the last class of the semester, so the topic was the latest of Dylan's 33 albums, "Together Through Life."

"He's admitting the fact that he's getting up there in years," the professor lectured.

Even before starting the freshman seminar three years ago, Lubet knew that Dylan remains uniquely popular among college-age music fans. His audiences boast a wider age range than most '60s
acts on tour. His songs also sell well on iTunes.

All of the students were already big fans when they signed up for the course.

"His music is so ambiguous, we could analyze his lyrics forever," said Derek Landseidel, a Spanish major whose first concert was Dylan at Midway Stadium in 2005.

Art major Chase Mathey boasted, "People get jealous when you tell them you're in this class."

The course moved chronologically, paying special attention to the civil rights era and his songs' meaning and style. Two books were required -- any two.

"Part of the problem is too much has been written on him," said Lubet (who is also writing a book on Dylan). "One big challenge in teaching him is simply discerning fact from fiction."

One of the semester's most memorable discussions ignited over the song ranked No. 1 in Rolling Stone magazine's new Dylan cover story, "Like a Rolling Stone." Some women in the class contended it was misogynistic (the teacher did not disagree).

Dialogue was also buoyed by Dylan's controversial trip to China, which prompted a finger-wagging column by the New York Times' Maureen Dowd.

"It was another example of any time people expect anything from him, they often don't get what they want," noted Ian Robertson.

Dylan courses at other universities include "When the Ship Comes In: Bob Dylan & the '60s" (Philadelphia's La Salle University) and "Forever Young: The Life and Times of Bob Dylan" (San Antonio's Trinity University).

At Boston University, "Every semester I need to turn students away," said lecturer Kevin Barents, who described his class as a "sneaky introduction-to-poetry course."

Indiana University's Dylan class is all about music, "ranking him up there alongside Beethoven and Mozart," Prof. Glenn Gass said.

"He's that kind of composer whose work can be appreciated and analyzed to no end. I think we're just seeing the start of Dylan courses."

Lubet also hopes to start a more advanced Dylan course at the U. The professor believes "there's something more authentic to teaching about him here," pointing to everything from his Minnesotan dialect to the North Country imagery in his lyrics.

"He's one of the most influential people of the last century, and interest in him doesn't seem to be waning -- here in his home state, or anywhere."

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