

A14 Revisited: celebrating the 40th anniversary of Cambridge's Bob Dylan Society

Stefan Tuchel reflects on his first encounter with the enigmatic group, drawn together by their shared love for one singer's music



In an era of Cliff Richard, Pete Seeger, and the Bachelors, Bob Dylan was unbelievable

by **Stefan Tuchel**

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The wafts of the harmonica grew as I scrambled up the stairs. Poking my head in, I saw a modest room with a huddle of around thirty people (mostly over-60s) packed around a table. Pizza boxes were scattered; beers half drunk. A noughties Sony sound system sat on a chair opposite, cables strewn; a TV on the wall shuffled through old photos. The walls were decorated with a drab red moose motif wallpaper. A man approached me, asking for £2.50 – in cash. Explaining that I didn't have any on me, he, recognising my curious youth, asked me whether I was a student. Responding with a yes, he laughed, saying that they weren't taking payment from students – a politesse perhaps prompted by my novelty.

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I nabbed one of the last seats and, given the chattiness of the regulars, I tried my luck at some small talk, risking the beginner's gambit, “Have you come from far?” The spectacled man responded in staccato: “Harston.” I resorted to my pint. Each person who entered waved at those that they recognised. With the noticeable feeling of being an outsider, I had found myself at the Cambridge Bob Dylan Society.

In November 1984, the inaugural monthly meeting was held. Just four members were present. With the release of Mangold's *A Complete Unknown*, Dylan is once more in the limelight. As should the Cambridge Bob Dylan Society – the oldest of its kind in the UK. As my luck had it, on this grim November night, the meeting was no normal fare but, rather, the 40th anniversary of the society.

Standing at a DIY lectern was a man in a graphic T-shirt of *The Times They Are A-Changing* – over it an unbuttoned shirt; beneath that, a ballooning stomach. He was introduced by a roar “it’s Bob Dylan!” Keith (his actual identity) began to speak, first mentioning all those absent: some had had scheduling difficulties, some had moved abroad, some were no longer with us. One of the latter was Christopher Ricks of Christ’s College, one of the society’s founders. His 2004 book, *Dylan’s Visions of Sin* was of totemic importance in Dylan’s journey to receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2016. So obsessed was the Professor of English Literature by Dylan that the work leapt into giddying overintellectualising, obsessing over two lines in songs and extolling their greatness.

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In 1986, Ricks left for Boston, taking with him access to what had from 1984-86 been the society’s home: his office. Thus began a decades-long pub crawl of Cambridge: the Portland Arms, the Golden Hind, the Rope and Twine, the Boathouse, the Unicorn, the Red Lion, before, finally, where I found myself, the Red Bull, Newnham – each with its own lore, that Keith sketched out in a map of time. At each photograph, or anecdote someone in the crowd would nod at a name or face – occasionally exclaiming “I look just the same!” At times irreverent gags were uttered (unreproducible in publication); at others, eyes dampened. As a 40-something and a paisley-wearing man sang in ensemble, ‘Is Your Love in Vain’, looking down I saw shoes tapping; around the room glances were shared in innocent conspiracy.

The intermission began. One of the founders, John Stokes, moseyed his way over to me, “I don’t think I’ve seen you before – is it your first time?” Thus began a wholesome conversation ending in my introduction to Keith.

Aged 14, Keith the compere, in a school of straight-laced schoolboys, was passed a record by one of his friends with the simple order to ‘listen to this’. In an era of Cliff Richard, Pete Seeger, and the Bachelors, was Bob Dylan – “looking like a teenager, yet sounding like a 60-year old’ was unbelievable. It was as if ‘a cat won Crufts.’” Reaching into eulogy, Keith waxed lyrical: these “gun-bastard songs,” always with a profound theme and target, had been so influential, so potent that now we no longer have war, inequality, racism, sexism, and crime. “Not a bad bloke,” he sardonically observed. He then demanded that I draw the raffle before returning to his DIY pulpit.

As we recommenced, Keith called me up, at first with the quite indiscriminating “the guy with the glasses”; then the quite discriminating, “he goes to Cambridge so he’s a bit of a ponce” before the redeeming, “but he’s alright.”

Without realising it, we had reached the end. What was conspicuous at the Cambridge Bob Dylan Society, was the paucity of Bob Dylan. It wasn’t just about fanaticism; literary analysis; nor a one-upmanship of niche knowledge. Bob was, rather, the soundtrack to these people’s lives – as he somehow ends up being also for me. For any and all who at some point

had been touched by his music, they had found a home here. It was a testament to each and every individual involved throughout the history of the society's forty years.

To play them out, as was apparently the tradition, the noughties sound system was booted up to play, 'A Series of Dreams':

"I was thinking of a series of dreams

Where nothing comes up to the top

Everything stays down where it's wounded

And comes to a permanent stop"

Leaving the pub, I hummed, popped in my earphones, found the song on Spotify, and heard the words my mum had always told me play in my head: "Now one more time but louder."

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