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T. Our Time

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30 pages of local memories

All about Bob

He was the voice of a generation and for over two decades a group of his most devoted fans have been meeting in celebration of him. James Fuller discovers more about The Cambridge Bob Dylan Society



Bob Dylan's contribution to the world of modern music is immeasurable. The gravelly-voiced harmonica-toting entertainer has been belting out his songs for more than 40 years and a group of his staunchest fans have been meeting in reverence to the man and his music for over half of that time.

The Cambridge Bob Dylan Society first met in September 1984 and is the longest-running Dylan group in the UK. The bi-monthly meetings have been popular since their inception and regularly attract between 40 and 50 people.

John Nye, who is one of a four-strong organising committee alongside John Stokes, Keith Agar and Chris Cooper, explained how it all began.

"Before the publication of his recent autobiography *Chronicles Vol. 1*, Bob Dylan was always very secretive, and very rarely spoke about his music, and never about himself.

"Before his book there were only rare newspaper articles, interviews and, of course, Dylan in concert.

"Fans have always wanted to get to know more about Dylan, to get a little closer to him and his music – to basically hear and see more of him. That's the niche we filled."

"It was just a way of meeting up with like-minded people who have become friends," adds John Stokes. "Dylan was the catalyst."

The group began meeting in rooms at Christ's College provided by Christopher Ricks, then Professor of English at Cambridge University.

Professor Ricks, a recognised arts critic and Dylan fan, has compared the legendary singer's lyrics to the poetry of John Keats and says his use of English is the best since Shakespeare.

Dylan is without doubt a remarkable man. Over the course of a hugely varied and successful career this multi-talented and faceted man has achieved iconic status and shows no signs of slowing down.

As well as worldwide record sales running into the many millions, he has received Grammy Awards, an Oscar (for the song *Things Have Changed* used in



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the Michael Douglas film *Wonder Boys*) and has even been nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature.

But, despite all this success, there is no resting on laurels and his musical output and work ethic is as impressive as ever.

"For 40 years there's been something new every year – his work ethic is incredible. Since 1980 he's done about 100 concerts a year and he's always looking forward," says John Stokes, a 57-year-old legal accountant from Fenstanton.

John Nye, 54, adds: "Dylan fans are unlike fans of any other musician or singer/songwriter; it isn't a teeny-bopper fan thing for any of us. He is no Elvis Presley or Barry Manilow – he is in a genre of his own.

"At our meetings you'll hear people talk of Dylan and his music, not about Dylan the myth and legend. We follow the man and his music, not the icon."

The society's current meeting place is the Sino Tap, in Pound Lane, but it has had many homes down the years. The gatherings, which the committee say are extremely sociable events, are compered by the irrepressible Keith Agar.

The format changes each time but includes guest speakers on Dylan-related topics, quizzes, videos of Dylan featuring films and interviews, audio and occasionally live music. A monthly magazine is also produced.

"Yes, we have our own magazine, *Free Wheelin'*, which I edit," says John Stokes. "We started it in 1985 and an edition has been published each month for the last 20 years."

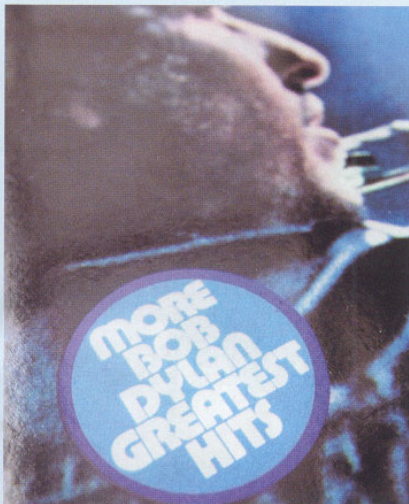
The scope and variety of Dylan's music means the society is never short of subjects to cover.

"We all like Dylan for the songs, but because Dylan's repertoire is so vast we all like different aspects of his career," says John Nye, a proof-reader from Longstanton. "I always put music first and words second, John is the other way around, Chris is the archivist and collects anything Dylan, while Keith just loves the nostalgia of it all."

As you would expect, the group all have long



From left: John Nye, Chris Cooper, Keith Agar and John Stokes
 From left: Keith Agar, John Nye, Chris Cooper (seated) and John Stokes.

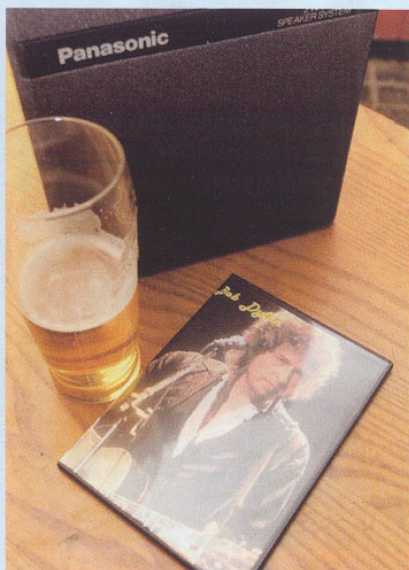


The Cambridge Bob Dylan Society



Friday 26 November
starting at 8, don't be late

Sino Tap
(the new name for The Rope and Twine)
3 Pound Lane
Cambridge CB3 0AE



editor@ourtimecambs.co.uk



associations with Dylan and were fans long before the society formed.

"Keith first saw him in 1965, Chris and myself in 1966," says John Nye. "But the single fact we all share is that from the moment we were first 'introduced' to his music, we were hooked. And each of us hooked in different ways. Now, 40 years later those differences still exist."

"We all come at it from different angles," agrees John Stokes. "That's one of the joys of Dylan, there's so much to him, so many facets that everyone is attracted to something different."

"There is still that mystique which surrounds him and in the early days he really was the voice of our generation."

That said, John reveals he has no desire to meet the man himself.

"To be honest he has such a reclusive nature, he's such a loner, that I don't think he would be good to meet. I wouldn't want to meet him."

The society's meetings, like Dylan's concerts, attract people of all ages and from a wide geographical area.

"We have people from their mid-20s to their 60s," says John Stokes. "People come to socialise and they come from all over. There are regulars from Lowestoft, Norwich, St Albans, Bedford, Birmingham, Leicester and London."

John Nye adds: "Most of the people who come to our meetings have been following Dylan for years, some of them from the beginning of Dylan's career."

"He is however a major influence on younger bands and therefore his music appeals to old and young alike."

This influence has been felt down the years and bands from the Beatles to U2 and Oasis have acknowledged it.

The extent to which the group's meetings have become a social vehicle from which firm friendships have been established was evidenced in 1999 when one of their number, John Green, died prematurely at the age of 43.

An event was organised by the society in his memory, at Northampton, and

'There is still that mystique which surrounds him and in the early days he really was the voice of our generation'

was attended by more than 200 people, including visitors from the USA.

The Cambridge Bob Dylan Society, like the man himself, continues to go from strength to strength and its organising committee says newcomers are always warmly welcomed.

"Everyone is welcome to attend our meetings which are usually held on the last Friday of every other month," says John Nye.

The next meeting is on March 18 from 8pm, at the Sino Tap, and there is an entrance fee of £2.

For further details call John Nye on 01954 270097 or John Stokes on 01480 468726.