

Tangled Up in Books: Using the Lyrics of Bob Dylan to Understand the Changing Times of Collection Development

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Tangled Up in Books: Using the Lyrics of Bob Dylan to Understand the Changing Times of Collection Development

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In 1965, Bob Dylan famously “went electric” at the Newport Folk Festival. Folk purists were outraged, but that was a defining moment for folk music, folk-rock, and everything that came afterward. Twenty or so years later, libraries had their own “going electric” moments and things have never been the same. The folk purists booed Dylan back then; libraries also got a lot of flack from the changes they implemented. So this got me thinking about Bob Dylan’s (2016) lyrics and how some of them can perfectly, and beautifully, relate to the changes I’ve seen in libraries over the past 40 years.

Let’s start with this line. Here’s Bob Dylan commenting on library budgets.

Money doesn’t talk, it swears.
—“It’s All Right, Ma, I’m Only Bleeding”

I use this lyric on library guides for economics courses and the students chuckle. Some of them even know who Bob Dylan is.

Academic librarians have to work with faculty, for better or worse. Mr. Dylan could have been writing about the librarian’s liaison role with the faculty in these lyrics.

You’ve been with the professors
And they’ve all liked your looks.
With great lawyers and scholars
You have discussed lepers and crooks.
You’ve been through all of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s books.
You’re very well read, it’s well known.
—“Ballad of a Thin Man”

And speaking of faculty, do you remember how hard it was to persuade them to give up their treasured print journals and embrace online access to articles? From the same song:

Something is happening here
And you don’t know what it is,
Do you, Mr. Jones?
—“Ballad of a Thin Man”

But then more and more changes came down the line. Librarians, and faculty, were confronted with approval plans, demand-driven acquisitions, e-books, streaming video, open access publications, and more.

There’s too much confusion
I can’t get no relief.
—“All Along the Watchtower”

Bob Dylan is quoted frequently in law review articles and even in Supreme Court cases. Here’s what he might say about libraries and copyright and fair use.

But to live outside the law you must be honest.
—“Absolutely Sweet Marie”

And how about those problematic license agreements we all sign (and sometimes even read)?

But to live outside the law you must be honest.
—“Absolutely Sweet Marie”

I don’t mind using a good lyric twice!

Mr. Dylan has also reflected on libraries’ weeding and deselection practices.

I must have been mad,
I never knew what I had
Until I threw it all away.
—“I Threw It All Away”

Bob Dylan isn’t known to be an especially warm and fuzzy guy, even though he has written some beautiful love songs. He can be quite brutal in his put-downs of other people. He certainly pulls no punches with these lines that could be about the relationship of libraries to publishers and vendors.

You got a lot of nerve
To say you are my friend.
—“Positively Fourth Street”

Or these sentiments:

But power and greed
And corruptible seed,
Seem to be all that there is.

—“Blind Willie McTell”

But, happily, things are getting better in this area. Today
this is what the publishers’ reps are saying to libraries:

Do you want to make a deeeeeeeal?

“Like a Rolling Stone”

Finally, what does the future hold for libraries?

The answer, my friend,
Is blowin’ in the wind.
The answer is blowin’ in the wind.

—“Blowin’ in the Wind”

Although I’ve had a great career in academic libraries,
I can’t help thinking of these lines as my retirement
gets closer.

An’ here I sit so patiently,
Waiting to find out what price
You have to pay to get out of
Going through all these things twice.

—“Stuck Inside of Mobile with
the Memphis Blues Again”

References

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