

One Fan's Search for Seeds of Greatness in Bob Dylan's Hometown

The iconic songwriter has transcended time and place for 60 years. What should that mean for the rest of us?



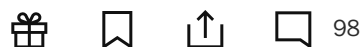


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Crossing main street, the wind tries to cut your legs out from under you. In the stiff chill of a Minnesota morning, even looking both ways before crossing is a struggle. One way is enough.

The Hibbing Public Library is just opening its doors, and an out-of-towner approaching the front desk can mean only one thing. A gracious young woman behind the counter quickly gets on the intercom. “Can someone please open up the Bob Dylan room?”

Always bound by destiny, Dylan admittedly couldn’t get out of this small mining town fast enough. It makes me feel good, though, that the residents still take pride in their treasures from the life of the wiry Robert Allen Zimmerman, who spent many formative and formidable days growing up on Hibbing’s streets.

Library specialist April Fountain lowers her voice to let me know that, out of curiosity, she took one of those ancestry DNA tests to see if she had a link to Dylan. “Saliva and all,” she says. “I don’t have any real validation. I mean, nothing official, but it shows that we’re related.”

A gentleman standing in the lobby overhears us speaking of Bob Dylan and abruptly asks, “Why does he always snub Hibbing?”

Dylan has said that people can be born in the wrong place with the wrong name and the wrong parents, but in recent years he’s acknowledged that his Iron Range roots and upbringing have had an immeasurable impact on his life. I’m trying to think of how to best explain that to the man, but having said what he wanted to say, the man walks off without another word. Whether they like it or not, everyone born in this town who has stayed the course is now a descendant of Bob Dylan, with or without a saliva test.

“I wrote him a letter,” Fountain says. “Never heard back.”

Another library worker directs me to the stairs leading to the lower level of the building. The atmosphere below is more basement than an extension of the well-kept library above. Bargain books sit in bins on one end. A narrow hallway lined with coat hangers leads to an open door. A broom and dustpan haphazardly lean near a placard pointing to the “BOB DYLAN EXHIBIT.”

The modest presentation would be fitting if you didn’t account for the past 60-plus years of his life spent contemplating where we’ve been, where we are, where we’re going, and turning it into art for the ages. A mosaic of a man, when it comes to truth and matters of the heart, Bob Dylan is the best time capsule we have.

The Washington Post Magazine



Perspective | I went to Las Vegas to test whether I was really ready for life on the other side of the pandemic

Before the pandemic the band Midland was on the verge of country stardom by reclaiming vintage styles

So many great artists burn out young, lose their reverence, disappear into drugs, or die tragically before they reach their potential. Rarely do we get to embrace the entirety of a life — a legend in full — that has yielded this kind of greatness, that lets us rhapsodize with such grandeur and not be trafficking in hyperbole or wasted worship.

At first glance, it appears as if a basic conference room has been transformed into an underground recognition of Hibbing's wayward son. A vibrant, nearly life-size papier-mache sculpture of Dylan, which looks like it escaped from a

high school homecoming float, looms at the far end of the room. It steals the eye but gives the wrong impression.

The contents of the room, beginning with Robert Zimmerman's framed birth certificate from May 24, 1941, and including rare photographs, are an extremely well-curated depiction of his early years in conjunction with a list of accomplishments and honors since he high-tailed it out of this mining town in 1959. A list so long and overwhelming you'd have to take a nap about a third of the way in, so we'll just go with a few highlights: the [Presidential Medal of Freedom](#). [Pulitzer Prize](#). French Legion of Honor. Over 125 million albums sold. The [Nobel Prize in Literature](#). And instead of calling it quits like so many of his contemporaries, his tour is listed as the Rough and Rowdy Ways World Wide Tour, which started in 2021 and is scheduled through 2024. Who books a three-year tour? At 80!

To top it off, the [Bob Dylan Center](#), a 29,000-square-foot archival and display space, which will be more comparable to a presidential library than a tribute to an iconic rock star, will open in Tulsa in May, shortly before Dylan turns 81. And when an artist of Dylan's stature goes 80 years and counting, the voice of a generation becomes a voice for the ages.

There are never any straight answers when it comes to the famously cunning Dylan. I have nothing to say to him, myself. I am very comfortable with simply opening the gifts he continues to give us, especially since he seems to release another [bootleg series](#) or a [fresh album](#) as often as he visits every town in the world. Still, if we are stuck in an elevator one day for 16 hours, I would like to have a conversation starter.

But what would I ask?

Enough about that. More important, if you go on Dylan's [official website](#) there is the typical musical artist menu across the top of the page. You know, "TOUR" ... "NEWS" ... "ALBUMS" ... "BOOKS." But then, right beside "ART," is the jolting and for certain individuals a life-changing word: "WHISKEY."

Yeah, whiskey. And this is where I come in. You didn't think this was all going to be about Bob Dylan, did you?

The Bob Dylan collection, including a nearly life-size papier-mache statue of the singer-songwriter, on display at the Hibbing Public Library in Hibbing, Minn.

It's 2019, and our family is discussing a move. We're living in Florida and really have nothing going on other than, perhaps, [the embarrassment of living in Florida](#). We can live anywhere, not because, "*Hey, my dream job allows me to work anywhere I desire!*" but because our jobs are low-paying and suck, so it doesn't really matter where we go.

We start contemplating Austin ... Nashville ... Denver ... 'cause we're the cool, hip people you keep hearing about. Back-and-forth we go. You know, listing pros and cons and ...

By happenstance, long before I see the heading on his website, I spot a small story online detailing Bob Dylan's Heaven's Door whiskey and announcing that the Heaven's Door Distillery and Center for the Arts will open in Nashville in the fall of 2020. Pro!

It will also include a music venue, a collection of his welding art and a gift shop. This is the sign I was never waiting for. We will move to Nashville, where I will work in Dylan's gift shop in the year 2020, which, to me, would be akin to working in Shakespeare's gift shop circa 1623.

I make no bones about heralding Dylan as [our Shakespeare](#). If you don't buy into that, you don't buy America and its string of undeniable true legends. You don't buy Mark Twain or Lincoln. You don't buy Muhammad Ali or John F. Kennedy or Martin Luther King Jr. or Michael Jor ...

At an age when your world is the size of your fist and nothing seems to matter, Dylan's work mattered to my brother and me.

I tend to turn into a blathering fool when I talk about Dylan, so I solicited the viewpoints of a few other people who are a little more grounded and succinct. In 2020, singer-songwriter Emma Swift put out a critically acclaimed album devoted to Dylan's music titled "Blonde on the Tracks," which included songs from several decades. "I feel enormously grateful to be on the planet for the Dylan era," she tells me, "to witness these songs being born and celebrated so widely, and to study and delight in them in the here and now."

The here and now is what makes the songs so special. "I feel very lucky to be close in space and time to songs like '[Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands](#)' and '[Murder Most Foul](#)' and '[Jokerman](#),'" Swift says.

That's it! I love the idea of sharing space and time with the greats, not just reading about them in history books. And the gift shop will forever keep me in the proximity of creative genius.

So we sold our stuff, packed up what was left (I'll leave out the 10-hour shouting matches to convince the family Nashville was our destiny) and arrived in Music City at the end of 2019. Once settled, I immediately typed the address to the distillery site into Apple Maps, hit the highway and smashed right into the back of a college student on her way home for the holidays. Hey, I was excited! No one got hurt, and after the police left I carried on to my destination. It was more than I ever could have fathomed.

The structure they're renovating is a 160-year-old church, and the first thing I spotted was the statue of a headless angel in the parking lot. For some reason that seemed like a good omen. I could envision the whole complex, with me having the run of it. Folding T-shirts in the gift shop, wandering around on my breaks, munching carrots and admiring Bob's massive welding art pieces. Maybe even get a side gig as an usher at the intimate music hall. Dylan might cook up an impromptu show or two with Nashville-based singer-songwriters Langhorne Slim and Steve Poltz opening. What a night! What a life!

Of course, I had to bide my time until construction was completed, so I got a job at a grocery store. Got me used to running a cash register, make believe I'm ringing up a Bobby Bobblehead, even if it was just a head of iceberg lettuce.

Flash forward to March 2020 and the pandemic. (Con!) The distillery stalls indefinitely, and [I'm stuck in a grocery store](#) where all anyone cares about is if we'll have more toilet paper in stock tomorrow. We won't.

Today, Heaven's Door seems as if it is on eternal hold. So to tide me over until it does open, I decide to visit Dylan's hometown.

I was sure I'd have plenty to learn, not only about Dylan, but also about myself and why I have such a personal attachment and urgent need to hang around his

universe. I wonder if he understands and contemplates the major effect he has on people. Not the wackos who stalk him at hotels or want to work in his gift shop, but the masses who quietly marvel at his music and always stick up for his voice when others say it sounds like a leaky sewer pipe about to burst at the seams.

Various images of Dylan at the library.

Books and images at the library.

A copy of Dylan's birth certificate on display at the library. He was born Robert Allen Zimmerman, but everyone called him Bobby.

On Bob Dylan Drive, musical notes have been painted on the crosswalk students use to get to school. The notes coincide with their footsteps and the line "How many roads must a man walk down" from "Blowin' in the Wind."

The stretch of street in front of Dylan's former house in Hibbing has been renamed Bob Dylan Drive.

The sign for the Androy Hotel, where Bobby Zimmerman celebrated his bar mitzvah.

It's late, and the town's main street — Howard Street — is empty. Through my ear buds, a plain-spoken woman leads me on an audio Bob Dylan Walking Tour. To my right, on a corner of Fifth Avenue East is the Hibbing Bowling Center, where in 1955-1956 the “teenage bowling competition was won by a group called the Gutter Boys. Bob was one of the six members of the team.”

I chose to take this walk when the town is shut down because when I was a teen that was my midnight trek home from whatever — movies, ballgames, drinking in the woods with Nick and Redmond. We are all familiar with that “all-alone-in-this world” walk when you're 15, no matter the distance. The night rattling in your head, the future an amazingly scary proposition.

I know this tour is a far cry from walking 1.9 miles in another man's shoes, but I can see glimpses of quiet creation at work. I stop to press my face against the glass of the storefront where the L & B Café used to be. Bob and his girlfriend Echo used to hang out here after school, smoking and playing the jukebox. I squint, imagining I can see them acting cool, laughing their heads off, Bob imitating Buddy Holly, leg cocked, Echo dramatically swooning. But all I can see is my own reflection.

My introduction to Dylan came through my older brother's record collection. My brother Will was a sensitive soul, and I recall many times when he was angry or hurt he would lock himself away, put on his headphones and disappear into Dylan. In our early teens we had a reverence for his music. Even if I couldn't explain it, I felt it. Oddly, at an age when your world is the size of your fist and nothing seems to matter, his work mattered to us.

“Our intention is not to explain Dylan,” says Steven Jenkins, director of the Bob Dylan Center in Tulsa. “If anything, it’s to create even more questions.”

A highlight of this walking tour is the Androy Hotel; its original sign atop the four-story building is riveting with nothing but the night sky as its backdrop. It is now apartments and 55-and-older housing, but it was once the social center of the town where Bobby Zimmerman celebrated his bar mitzvah with family and friends. It is easy for me to see him and his sly smile working the room — collecting envelopes — but it’s hard for me to grasp the teen Dylan preparing and studying to be a man.

I studied for nothing. Growing up, I didn’t even read comic books. I read the lyrics on record albums. When I took a class at junior college and the teacher asked what the first book I read was, I said that I never read books, only album lyrics. I said that I read [Cat Stevens](#)’s “Tea for the Tillerman” a lot. Other students laughed, and the teacher said, “Okay,” and moved on.

But I didn’t. Dylan has had a fascinating relationship with religion over the years, though celebrating faith and transitioning to manhood is alien to me. My devotion has been only to the music and the words that I’ve turned to for healing. They were what I leaned on both creatively and, eventually, spiritually. Putting an album on, lying in the dark and listening intently was the closest I ever got to having a religious experience — and still is.

Over 400 people attended Dylan’s bar mitzvah that day, and the family’s connections and history are, literally, around every corner on this tour. There’s the storefront where Grandma Florence and Uncle Lewis operated a clothing store. Down on First Avenue stood the Lybba Theatre, named after his great-grandmother. The building that once housed the family business, Zimmerman

Furniture and Electric, is a stretch off the main road where side streets become more industrial.

The temperature is dropping. Steel cold. Freezing temperatures in spring are not uncommon in this part of the country. In Duluth, where Dylan was born and lived till age 6, it once snowed in August. I laughed when I read that Dylan said of Hibbing's weather: " ... you couldn't be a rebel — it was too cold." I'm not laughing now.

"As a teen, Bob worked in the store helping with deliveries," the audio tour states. After-school jobs, steady girl, bowling team — the tour is painting a picture of the average Midwest upbringing. Until that infamous day at Hibbing High School, which looms mighty up on East 21st Street.

The exterior of the grand Hibbing High School, where Dylan went to school. The building has been dubbed the "Castle in the Woods" and "the school with the golden doorknobs," says maintenance supervisor John Uhrbom.

Maybe Dylan is right about destiny because Hibbing High looks like a place where youths are knighted and legends begin. Bankrolled by millions in mining money a century ago, it is the most outrageously flamboyant and decadent public school I have ever seen. During last night's walking tour, I had viewed the school from the outside and thought the facade looked a bit like Hogwarts, but today local archivist and monumental Dylan collector Bill Pagel caught me off guard by insisting I tour this school immediately when I met him earlier. "I talked to the principal," he said. "1:15. Let's go."

The students, who are on a half day, are making a run for it, fleeing down an 18-foot-wide grand marble staircase as we are entering. The interior design includes handpicked tile from Greece, and light shimmers across the ceiling above frescoes lining the walls. It's surprising to picture Dylan, who has always been a man of the people, being educated in such lavish surroundings.

Adorned with massive Czechoslovakian chandeliers and exit signs made of Tiffany glass, the building has been dubbed the "Castle in the Woods" and "the school with the golden doorknobs," says maintenance supervisor John Uhrbom, who is kind enough to give us a tour.

Maintaining this place must be similar to preserving a grand historical hotel or fine arts museum, or the musical beginnings of the greatest American songwriter of our time, even if he was a little underappreciated when it came to showtime. That infamous day: Long before the folkie establishment threatened to pull the plug at the [1965 Newport Folk Festival](#), where Dylan broke from tradition by going electric, the curtain was pulled by the principal of Hibbing High. At the school's talent show Bobby Zimmerman (everyone called him Bobby) created hysteria by inhabiting the spirit of Little Richard, banging on the keys and ripping into "True Fine Mama."

The tale goes that the principal ordered Bobby be removed from the stage. "At the class's 10th-year reunion, he sat and laughed about it with the football players that carried him off the stage that day," Uhrbom says.

“That’s a new one,” says Pagel. “I never heard about the football players.”

But wait: Dylan went to his high school reunion? Even I’m too cool to go to a high school reunion. “Yes,” Uhrbom says, “and from what I heard most of the class always thought he was a weirdo.” But he was *their* weirdo, then their magnificently famous weirdo.

When I first heard mention of the talent show incident, I envisioned a little performance in my own shabby school auditorium and Dylan banging on the cranky music teacher’s old upright piano. Little did I know that the Hibbing High auditorium looks like an opera house in Vienna. And that piano? A gleaming black Steinway valued at about \$80,000.

“We had the piano out on the stage when there was a group here from Denmark — three gentlemen,” Uhrbom says. “And when we told them it was the piano Bob played, they were in awe.”

He told one guy he could go ahead and play it: “So he sits down and puts his hands over the keys, but he refuses to touch them. Like it’s sacred. His hands are hovering over the keys, shaking.”

Dylan memorabilia on display at Hibbing High.

Signs at the school auditorium.

The auditorium at Hibbing High School, where Dylan once performed

Little Richard's "True Fine Mama" at a talent show.

The interior design of Hibbing High includes handpicked tile from Greece, and light shimmers across the ceiling above frescoes lining the walls.

Students still play the auditorium piano that Dylan played as a student at Hibbing.

The Hibbing High drama club practices in the auditorium.

Outside the high school is a monument to the man that makes me feel the admiration I have is suddenly shared by those around me, like we are all just one big Dylan-loving universe. It was a long time coming and brought to fruition only by a lot of hard work by a small group of people — and, oh, Dylan winning a Nobel Prize in 2016 for “having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition.”

Forget 10 Grammy Awards, the honorary doctorate from Princeton — once you receive the Nobel your genius cannot be denied. At least not in this town. That was the moment others started listening to the local devotees who, for years, pushed for a tribute equal to the merits of Dylan’s achievements and formed the Hibbing Dylan Project.

Originally a statue was discussed, but the project committee decided that wasn't right. And which Dylan would you make the statue of anyway: the folkie, the holy roller, the grizzled troubadour? Plus, you know how [mugs of famous people can go awry](#) in a sculpture? Have the nose just a little off and all of a sudden you've got a statue of David Schwimmer.

The design of the monument is outstanding. On one side is the tribute to his winning the Nobel, and on the other, cut into a metal grid, is a massive whirlwind of Dylan's lyrics that appear to be swept up in the turbulence of life. Majestic lines interwoven into a mighty tornado of poetry.

There is a third element to this tribute: a lone chair made of brass stands several feet in the forefront, seemingly representing a seat of learning. Etched into its spine is a statement from Dylan's Nobel lecture: "I had principles and sensibilities and an informed view of the world. Learned it all in grammar school." A welcome acknowledgment, it is a line that has left Hibbing proud and cemented the town's part in educating a Nobel laureate.

Dylan's still-in-progress legacy brings him about as close to immortality as one can get.

You know how songwriters — too many to mention — will humbly state that their greatest hits miraculously come out of the air or are sent from God? Dylan is thankfully much more down-to-earth when it comes to his talent, having said it plainly comes from a "wellspring of creativity."

Twain had the deep well. Shakespeare's well so was bottomless that some think his work was written by several people. I'm sure there's a little magic of the mind involved, but that overflowing well inside Dylan is something one can easily grasp in this space.

Most of us have only a puddle of creativity, at best. But it doesn't stop us from trying to create something extraordinary, which is kind of beautiful and endearing, isn't it? As a kid, when I began scribbling down things that popped in my head, I thought I was writing a song. I wrote a string of hits in my head that nobody ever heard.

Dylan tells the tale of how he was fortunate enough to see Buddy Holly perform shortly before he was killed in a plane crash. From the stage, Holly supposedly looked him in the eye and transmitted something into his being that gave him chills. Wouldn't it be awesome if it worked that way for the rest of us?

I've shared time and space sitting at the kitchen table on Willie Nelson's bus while he told stories of writing songs between poker hands. Spoke to John Prine about the meaning of life as he did his laundry. Clinked glasses in a toast with Lucinda Williams. Sat beside Tony Bennett long enough for him to accuse me of trying to steal the napkin he'd been doodling on. Had [Allison Russell](#), who was nominated for three Grammys this year, in my checkout line at the grocery store.

At least two of those musical giants looked me dead in the eye, especially when they wanted me to leave, but nothing was transmitted. Zero.

I am totally tone-deaf, can't even hum, but I still strive to write one good song, especially now that I live in Nashville. In this town, "creatives" get together to write songs like they're scheduling play dates, but I've yet to make an inspired connection. There's still time.

No one is better at inspiring you to face downtime than Dylan. He operates as if the future is infinite. When he wrote his best-selling book "[Chronicles: Volume One](#)," there was immediately talk and excitement about Volume Two. That was over 15 years ago. Having kept us guessing, he recently made the announcement that this fall he will be releasing a book titled "The Philosophy of Modern Song," a collection of essays on the art of songwriting. And the news release says he "breaks down how the addition of a single syllable can diminish a song."

Note to self: Keep dreaming.

The town's monument to Dylan, outside Hibbing High, features his lyrics and a lone brass chair.

Smithsonian Magazine declared the Tulsa center one of the most anticipated museum openings of 2022. It's in Tulsa because the family foundation that acquired the archives is based there. The Dylan center will also be within walking distance of the foundation's Woody Guthrie Center, which holds the archives of the folk hero who had a large influence on Dylan.

"The scope of the material and its impact is almost without equal in American culture," says Steven Jenkins, the Dylan center's director. "But our intention is not to explain Dylan. If anything, it's to create even more questions."

No problem there — the mystique and illusiveness of Dylan cannot be shattered, no matter how much information on his life is available. "Bob's given his blessing to the center and is okay, even delighted with all of this, but we don't expect him to be a guest here or dropping by," Jenkins says. "He doesn't want to look back. He's too busy moving forward."

Speaking of moving forward, I did see the center already had some great merch online, so I inquire about the gift shop. Making no promises, Jenkins simply says, "You can apply."

The organizers of the Dylan center deliberately never use the word "museum." With deep archives and over 100,000 items, the center will be an ideal place for researchers and scholars to dig into the details of Dylan's life's work. However, the main idea is not to put him on a pedestal but to bring inspiration to present and future songwriters.

The initiators of the Hibbing Dylan Project also have stated that their intention was to "create a space for people to sit and 'get to wondering' " about the many

ways Bob Dylan's musical career has influenced their lives. I have accepted that invitation.

When my brother Will died suddenly at the age of 44, it was right at the time of a huge Dylan reemergence in the mid-'90s, with the release of the album titled "[Time Out of Mind](#)." On Will's nightstand the evening he passed was a crumpled piece of paper, as slight as a fortune cookie slip. It was one line scribbled down from a song on the album: "[It's not dark yet, but it's getting there](#)."

It was all we had as a last note from him. Well, that and \$10,000 in \$100 bills in his underwear drawer that kept us all drowning our sorrows in craft beer for about 6½ years. But the words still haunt me and have bonded me to Dylan's work in a way that is deep and personal.

We had a stiff Catholic service for Will, but I had pulled the priest aside and told him I wanted to say a few words at some point. When he called me up to the lectern, I carried a heavy book as fat as the scriptures: the bound lyrics for every Dylan song ever written. I told those who gathered that I wanted to read something from "that other bible." Afterward the priest sought me out to be sure I knew there was only one true Bible. "Don't you forget that!" he said.

Being the first songwriter in a century to win a Nobel, Dylan wrote the obligatory banquet speech. He didn't show up at the award ceremony, so the U.S. ambassador to Sweden [read it to the audience](#). After viewing the Hibbing monument, I sat in the car and read the speech on my phone. It's a sincere, straightforward and enlightening piece of work. A revealing and gracious acceptance that [I suggest everyone read](#).

(Not now!)

For me, there is a revelatory passage in the speech where Dylan draws a connection between himself and Shakespeare. The fit and fury of creating art for an audience — to be spoken or sung — for performance often leaves little time for reflection, let alone conjuring thoughts of one day being recognized as a transcendent literary figure. As Dylan noted, Shakespeare was mightily busy

with the mundane: “Is the financing in place?” “Are there enough good seats for my patrons?” “Where am I going to get a human skull?”

I might add “Who’s manning the gift shop tonight?” to that list of Shakespeare concerns, but you get it. Dylan is a showman, peddling his art, with all the pressure and minutiae that involves, spending his life on the road, gathering musicians for days bound by recording, lighting, sound and promotion, and selecting the songs to perform before thousands on any given night. Accolades and awards and even contemplating his effect on fans like me are not really part of his act.

There is a famous clip from a news conference in 1965, during that period when Dylan would toy with journalists. A reporter poses the question, “Do you think of yourself primarily as a singer or as a poet?”

At the time, Dylan’s response elicits laughter, which he intended, but today — nearly 60 years later — he would probably say the same exact thing.

“Oh, I think of myself more as a song-and-dance man, you know.”

Dylan collector Bill Pagel outside Dylan's old family home in Hibbing.

I am standing in the heart of the 1950s, in a tidy, modestly furnished living room. Bill Pagel takes a small vase off the mantel and shows me the crack across the bottom and how it's been glued back together. "Bob broke it," he says matter-of-factly.

He pivots and points to a vintage winged chair in the corner. "That's original — got it from the family that bought the house and some of its furnishings from Bob's mother. You can sit in it if you want to ..."

I can't even take the steps across the floor. There is the weight of preservation and reverence in this place that I find jolting, and it's more due to Pagel

recognizing the historical importance of this home and meticulously guiding it back into the past than the fact that a swashbuckling Dylan once ran through this place with a child's abandon.

Pagel bought both the duplex in Duluth that Dylan lived in until age 6 ("I've got his high chair") and this two-story Italian modern abode where Dylan spent the bulk of his youth. "Being a collector is one thing. But once you start collecting houses, I guess it's more of a disease," he says.

Pagel isn't throwing together a sideshow here. Deeply connected in the community, he has been painstakingly collecting and curating items that are either original to the Zimmerman household or fitting to the time period. The home itself has been returned to the original color it was 70 years ago, and a distinguished brass plaque designating it the "Childhood Home of Bob Dylan from 1948 to 1959" now hangs outside above the front door.

One of the major things Pagel did was remove a large mural of the "Blood on the Tracks" album cover that the previous owner had on the garage door. "People still complain that I got rid of it," Pagel says. Tourists liked to take pictures in front of it. That is my favorite Dylan album, but that nonsense is too schlocky for someone of Dylan's stature.

Pagel's efforts are even more special because Dylan has a penchant for visiting the childhood homes of other prominent artists and peers. He once hopped a tour bus to see where John Lennon grew up and showed up at Neil Young's family place in Canada. Several years ago, he even got picked up by the police while wandering in a New Jersey neighborhood with no ID. Apparently, it was near where Bruce Springsteen wrote most of "Born to Run," but Dylan said he was just looking for houses for sale, on foot, in the middle of the night ... with no ID.

I believe him.

Standing in this living room, I wonder what Dylan looks for in such places, what kind of essence he is trying to capture. The story goes that at Young's childhood

home, he had asked if a certain window was the one Neil would gaze out when he strummed his guitar.

As I keep thinking of my one question for Dylan, I wonder what questions would he ask of himself if he stepped through the walls of his own childhood home, the place that sheltered him through the turmoil of youth in a claustrophobic town.

Pagel guides me into the kitchen, where a string of mama Zimmerman's original decorative plates dangle above a period-right stove. Earlier, he pointed out that the television was specific to the time period but definitely wouldn't have been a Zenith. "Zimmerman Electric only sold GE," he says.

Up in Bob's second-floor bedroom, Pagel points at an original nightstand beside the bed, which most likely held the radio that first blasted Little Richard. The radio that probably influenced him much more than any town ever could.

In front of the house the stretch of street has been renamed Bob Dylan Drive, and musical notes have been professionally painted on the crosswalk students use to get to school. The notes coincide with their footsteps and the line "How many roads must a man walk down" from "[Blowin' in the Wind](#)."

Ever the archivist, Pagel quickly says, "They got one of the notes wrong."

Amazingly, Pagel never puts himself across as a Dylan expert. He's simply a collector. "I could have collected Wayne Newton," he jokes. But what he has acquired is of such fine quality and so respectfully and meticulously cared for that it will certainly be held in high esteem for generations to come.

Very close to Dylan's age, Pagel knows he can't live forever, and the Tulsa center already has acquired part of his massive collection, with much more to come. "But, you know," he says, frowning. "I don't think they want the houses. "

Back in the bedroom of the teenage Dylan, Pagel says: "This light switch is original. Not the plate, but the switch. You can touch it if you want to."

I walk over and peer at it. It is extremely worn, deteriorated by the oils of fingertips and a million ups and downs.

I'm here and I'm now, sharing that time and space. As Pagel steps into the hallway I reach over and flick the switch down.

Good night, Bobby.

The living room in Dylan's childhood home in Hibbing. Bill Pagel owns the home, along with thousands of other pieces of Dylan memorabilia.

Dylan's bedroom in his former Hibbing home. His family ran Zimmerman Furniture and Electric in town.

Dylan's handwritten lyrics on a music sheet is part of Pagel's collection.

Part of Pagel's collection.

Pagel maintains an archive of photo negatives, posters and other memorabilia at his home.

Pagel prepares to scan a concert poster at his home in Hibbing.

Having a “[Queen’s Gambit](#)” moment. Lying in bed in a second-floor Airbnb rental beside a gas station on Howard Street, staring at the ceiling. It is covered with the swirls of all those Dylan lyrics lasered into the metal of the Hibbing monument.

It’s dizzying, and I’m unable to zoom in or concentrate on a single word. For some reason, I feel the need to go back to the monument, so I grab my boots and jacket and drive over to the high school. I park to the side and leave my headlights on, aimed at the lyrics. The words are shining in the high beams. I run my hand across the metal-cut lettering as if I am blind. And here are those words again: “It’s not dark yet, but it’s getting there.”

There are basic bonds that break the silence among us, that start the conversation in dead air when we think we have nothing left to say to each other. My dad and I had basketball. My son and I have basketball. My brother and I had Bob Dylan.

Dylan notoriously keeps moving, but I find him in the stillness.

Whenever I listened to the song that meant so much to my brother I always hung on for the “dark yet” lyric without even taking in the complete stanza. Now I tremble as I read: “Sometimes my burden seems more than I can bear.”

When my brother passed, he was tirelessly caring for our elderly parents. It startles me into the reality about what he must have been going through the day he died. I should have done so much more.

s I speed out of Hibbing, past one of the largest open-pit mines in the world, I can think of no better freedom than letting go of your name, your family and the place you grew up. It's a harsh sentiment when phrased like that, but it is really the way we are all meant to go out into this world, with the thrill of abandon. This stifling town is why he left, but he's taken this town and its history with him on a journey like no other.

This ride out of town is where Bobby Zimmerman ends and Bob Dylan begins. The achievements started piling up quicker than you can say, "If you're not busy being born, you're busy dyin'." Still in the dawn of his destiny, a 22-year-old Dylan stood nearby, like Forrest Gump, as Martin Luther King Jr. gave his "I Have a Dream" speech. When the Beatles needed to turn-on, he was right there to get them high for the first time.

When my brother needed comfort, Dylan's words spinning off the turntable came through again and again. Dylan has been masterful at relating both ends of life, but what is truly transcendent is the way he represents that stretch in the middle — that stretch that really defines us. That place where we truly live.

The greats will make you rethink everything.

Posters from Dylan fans hang in Pagel's home. Elsewhere in Hibbing, Pagel bought the house Dylan lived in from 1948 to 1959, as well as the duplex in Duluth that Dylan lived in until age 6.

Years ago, I stood in a field, watching the legendary [Chuck Berry](#) do that thing he did so magnificently — breathtakingly showcasing the birth of rock-and-roll every time he clutched that cherry red Gibson and duckwalked across a stage. This was deep into his final years, and afterward I heard someone complain about his guitar being out of tune and something about his sloppy musicianship. First, no matter the key, [Chuck Berry was always in tune](#). You earn that right. I shouted back at the guy, “Out of tune!? Do you realize what an honor and privilege it is to even be able to see this man in your lifetime?”

Dylan's tour will be stopping in Nashville in a few weeks, playing the historic Ryman Auditorium, also known as the Mother Church of Country Music. Dylan also revolutionized the music scene here when he recorded the seminal album "Nashville Skyline." No longer was this town relegated to down-home country artists. With its access to the brilliant local musicians that Dylan highlighted, suddenly everybody wanted to record in Nashville.

The Ryman is one of the most treasured venues in the world, and I hope to be at the show. If so, I get to watch a master tip that hat, strum a guitar, and sing words written from both a young and old heart. No matter where I sit, I will be patiently waiting for the troubadour to look me dead in the eye.

When it gets right down to it, we always half-joke that we are all just specks in the universe, and in the end, everything we do is pretty much meaningless, which is true for us puddle jumpers. But Dylan's still-in-progress legacy brings him about as close to immortality as one can get.

And sometimes when I get to wondering, I imagine bumping into Dylan on the side of my house when I'm taking out the garbage, and in that moment he claims he's just in the neighborhood to look at a home for sale.

I believe him.

But I have to seize the moment, and I think I do finally have a single question for him. "How does it feel?"

By that I mean, what is it like to know that you will never be "a complete unknown"?

In my little daydream, Dylan then says, "I don't know. ... Ahhhh. ... What do *you think* it feels like? I'm no different than you or the guy standing behind you."

I foolishly turn around to see the guy behind me, seeing no one, and when I turn back Dylan is gone.

T.M. Shine is a writer in Nashville. His most recent novel is “[Dear Sarah, Lately I’ve Been Tripping People.](#)”

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