

## INTERVIEWS

DR spoke with Mark Davidson, librarian of the Bob Dylan Archive®, via telephone in April 2020, with some follow-up questions in the ensuing months. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**DR:** I'm wondering about the archive in the time of coronavirus. Are there any safety measures (at the archive) that need to be put in place? Are there any other considerations of how to preserve the archive in case of, you know, whatever might come down the line?

**MD:** All of the archival environments are stable and remotely monitored, so the materials themselves are doing fine. In terms of the work that I've been doing, and Kate Blalack, archivist for the Woody Guthrie Archive, has been doing, this is not the worst thing in the world for us because we're able to focus on stuff that we've been wanting to get done for quite a long time. With the Woody Guthrie Center, and the Bob Dylan Center as well, both of those social media outlets have been very active lately. From the Bob Dylan side of things, we've been working through the backlog of filmed interviews that curator Michael Chaiken has conducted over the past few years and we've been posting those on social media. So hitting the pause button on all of this has been not a bad thing.

**DR:** What's your official title and role at the Bob Dylan Archive?

**MD:** I'm the archives director for the Woody Guthrie Center and the Bob Dylan Center®. So the Bob Dylan Archive, Cynthia Gooding Archive, Woody Guthrie Archive, Phil Ochs archive, and various other smaller collections that we have.

**DR:** What did you get your degrees in and how did that prepare you for this position with these archives?

**MD:** I did a PhD in Cultural Musicology at the University of Santa Cruz. I started in 2007 and the degree was sort of a blend of historical ethnomusicology and ethnomusicology. I went into their PhD program out of an undergrad in music

history and classical guitar from Florida State (University). I had some time in between my degrees, quite a gap of time, where I messed around in my twenties and played in bands and went on tours and made records before I went back to grad school.

**DR:** Cool.

**MD:** Like I said, I started that program in 2007. I was studying American modernist classical music—Henry Cowell, John Cage, Charles Seeger, Ruth Crawford—and I ended up writing a master's thesis on a woman named Sidney Robertson Cowell, who was a folk song collector in California and happened to be married to Henry Cowell. She was an incredibly fascinating figure, a force of nature, and very forward-thinking on her folk song collecting and field work practices. That became the starting point for my dissertation on government-sponsored folk music collecting, so all the stuff under the Works Progress Administration from about 1936 – 1941, which was my incredibly big, incredibly unwieldy and seldom read or referenced 700-some page dissertation, which I completed in 2015.

In 2012, I moved to San Francisco while I was A.B.D., moved to Austin to start a second master's degree in archiving and library science, a master's of science in information studies at the University of Texas at Austin. It also happened to be one of the few schools that had an audio preservation program, which was enticing. I did a capstone project on the recordings associated with the John A. Lomax papers archive at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History. I was also a research assistant for Doug Brinkley, who's a professor at Rice and a presidential historian who has written on a bunch of different presidents and conservation issues. He's a fascinating figure—he appears on CNN as their presidential historian—and he's done some research into Bob Dylan.

**DR:** Gotcha.

**MD:** And then I was on the academic job market. I was writing about the Blurred Lines copyright case and provisionally thinking about turning my dissertation into

a book when the George Kaiser Family Foundation (GKFF) bought the Bob Dylan Archive and they needed a librarian, or rather I was hired as a librarian. They needed an archivist and I just happened to be at the right place at the right time with the right degrees knowing the right people, and I moved up to Tulsa in August of 2017.

**DR:** It sounds like you traveled the country quite extensively through your touring band and through all of your academic pursuits. Did you have any hesitation about moving to this middle-sized city of Tulsa, Oklahoma at the time?

**MD:** Well, you know, I grew up in the Chicago suburbs, the very far-north Chicago suburbs, and finished up my undergrad at Florida State in Tallahassee. Lived in Santa Cruz, San Francisco, and Austin. And then moved to Tulsa. It was a transition, size-wise, but it's been an incredible experience getting to know this city and all of the communities that are here making it vibrant and exciting.

**DR:** In all those travels with live music and looking at archives, studying copyright and ethnomusicology, did you have any encounters with Dylan's work along the way?

**MD:** Well, I identify as a musicologist and not as an ethnomusicologist, because my scholarship and my work and my research interests are not field work-based in the same way an ethnomusicologist's is. As far as Bob Dylan is concerned, growing up for me it was the Beatles, and I was born in 1975, so let's say 1986, 1987, you have the twentieth anniversary of Sgt. Pepper's. The Traveling Wilburys came out around that time. The Grateful Dead made a comeback. Paul McCartney's doing *Flowers in the Dirt* and that record is getting quite a bit of press. There was a real sort of romance with these rock bands of the '60s, but also sort of a feeling of, "Oh my God, I can't believe that the Grateful Dead is still making music. I can't believe that Starship is so horrible." Most of those bands were either revered as a bygone thing, or were looked at as washed up, over the hill, totally not relevant anymore musically, culturally, and I think that that was actually kind of true.

So I knew Bob Dylan's importance to the Beatles' story. When grunge hit and I was in high school, there was the (Bob Dylan 30th Anniversary Concert Celebration in 1992), and Neil Young had a career resurgence with Pearl Jam. And that was another situation where it was like, I know who this guy is, I know why he's important, but I don't understand why he's still doing it now. All of that is to say, growing up, it was a very different time in terms of how these people were viewed. They were maybe revered for their old work, but they weren't really expected to do new, good stuff.

In college I began listening to early Dylan. I became politically conscious, which is kind of hard to do for a kid from the whitest, remotest northern suburbs of Chicago. So being in school, performing with ensembles, living in Oxford, Mississippi and listening to "Oxford Town" and being there—that's a moment. Or relating to "Last Song for Woody Guthrie," the spoken-word recording of Dylan. That was one of my favorite recordings ever, and it still is, of anything recorded in sound history. And (I was) playing that on my radio show at Florida State pretty much every time I had my show, which was Saturday night / Sunday morning, two a.m. to six a.m. I started listening to *Highway 61 Revisited* religiously. P.J. Harvey's cover of "Highway 61" was revelatory for me, and hearing her talk about the importance of Bob Dylan in the same breath as talking about the importance of Captain Beefheart while playing the kind of rock music that I wanted to hear at the time, in the Rid of Me era. That was really important. That's me growing up with Bob Dylan.

**DR:** It sounds like you have a foundation in folk music and rock 'n' roll and American music, and also in archival recordings. Now you're working with some of the most detailed Dylan scholars in the world. How important has it been for you to get to a place where you're conversant on the minutia of the Bob Dylan catalogue?

**MD:** Coming in off the street, if you put me in the Beatles archive and said, "Okay, deal with the foremost expert of the Beatles world," I would've been much more

conversant. There are few artists of any era that have inspired the kind of lunacy and obsessiveness around every bit of detail as has Bob Dylan, so it's a different deal. I've had arguments with people about what's more important, being a Dylan savant or being a competent archivist. It falls somewhere in the middle, but Dylan savants would say no, it's the knowledge of Dylan that's the important part. Now all of that is to say, I've worked here for two and a half years or more, and my knowledge of all of it increases like a thousand-fold every few months. It's really incredible.

**DR:** As you've gained this Dylan knowledge, are there any findings, or discoveries, or new understandings of him and his career that have especially stuck out to you?

**MD:** The thing that I've been thinking about a lot lately, and the thing I'm consistently impressed by, is how much of a traditionalist Dylan is, and how much he takes existing traditions and forms and recreates those in his own particular way. It's an extension of a folk process that can be found across the span of his career, through his latest recordings. And there are folks out there who have dedicated huge amounts of time to unearthing all of the references in his music and lyrics, or album artwork, or writings. It gets incredibly deep incredibly quickly. The breadcrumbs Dylan leaves, and the interpretation and reinterpretation of his work is all fascinating and remarkable.

Not only that, but with Dylan coming out with *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, the story gets richer and richer. His excellent, recent interview with Douglas Brinkley in the *New York Times* is testament to all of these ideas.

**DR:** What are some of the biggest challenges you face working in the archive day-to-day?

**MD:** The challenges, without getting too far into the weeds, (include) having a Dylan researcher saying, "We know where Bob was on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1964, and we know that this date can't be that." Getting that level of detail into the collection while up until a few months back, it was a staff of one.

When GKFF purchased the Dylan archive, it had been put up for sale and sent to us in a set of boxes, and these boxes were arranged in a very practical way—manuscripts of interest were maybe frontloaded in the first box and they gradually just put stuff in. And then you have a box like, “Well all these notebooks need to go somewhere so they’re all gonna go in this box, they fit in this box.” And so we got all these materials, and part of me coming on was that they wanted to get the Dylan archive open for researchers, and so a lot of the materials had been processed to the best of the ability of the person working on them at that moment. Essentially, there’s a lot of work we need to do as our knowledge has grown about the collection and where things came from and where things should be put. We’re rearranging materials and putting them in the order that they should be and making things as easy for researchers to access the physical materials as possible while building a digital archive system up to the highest archival standards in terms of metadata and the like that will allow them to see the archive in six dimensions. So you’re looking at manuscripts but you’re also able to look at these recordings associated with them. We’re able to do that in an online or at least digital realm that will make the archive come alive for researchers and interested parties.

**DR:** Will that be available online or will people still have to go to Tulsa to access it?

**MD:** It won’t be available online for any number of reasons. We hope the archive serves all of the unreleased stuff and stuff that nobody’s ever seen. Dylan’s probably the most bootlegged artist ever—you know, people are freakish about all of this stuff. Like somebody having a recording they shouldn’t have and somebody else being like, “Oh I want to hear that,” and the next thing you know it’s up on the internet—that still happens in Dylanland. It’s an insane landscape. But that’s part of the work that we’re doing, and we have all of the other archival collections that we’re working on too. But we’re getting ready to open the Bob Dylan Center in 2021. That’s our target date. The current coronavirus and quarantine situation—it’s actually been the best thing in the world for me, and

also I think for Kate, because we've been able to totally focus on the kind of stuff that I've been saying for well over a year, "As soon as I get the time, I'm going to do this." And my God, we've got the time now, so there's no shortage of work for us to do.

The point is, putting this archive together in the right way and going through it and gaining knowledge of the materials and acquiring things that we need is all currently for the service of making the future Bob Dylan Center an incredible experience, so the plan is to make a ton of stuff available so people still have the research component of the Bob Dylan Archive but in the Bob Dylan Center people will still be able to dive down really, really deep into the footage and the session tapes and the materials that we've got manuscripts for, and presenting those materials in this multi-dimensional way.

**DR:** In terms of the Bob Dylan camp, are they still sending stuff to Tulsa for the archive? Is there a steady trickle of things coming in, or was it a one-and-done proposition?

**MD:** There was the initial sale-and-donation situation. We had I think three shipments of materials, and we have gotten everything that was part of that initial deal. That's all now in Tulsa. We have a very good relationship with them. And I'm sure that there are more things out there that we would love to get. "Murder Most Foul" was just released and it would be awesome to—I don't even know if there's a manuscript for that stuff.

**DR:** There must be!

**MD:** Yeah, one doesn't know.

**DR:** If not from the Bob Dylan camp, then where else might new archival materials be coming from?

**MD:** So here's the thing. There are private collectors throughout the world who have been amassing Dylan materials, photographs or manuscripts or ephemera. And that doesn't take into account the stuff that has been produced around Bob

Dylan, like magazines and fanzines, albums and all of that. There's a ton of that stuff out there that would be great to have. I think there's an expectation that—and I think we would like this to be the case too—that Tulsa is and should be the place for all this stuff to live.

On the other hand, I think that archives in institutions can be colonial and cut-throat and the measure of their success is oftentimes based upon what they acquire in this sort of ever forward-moving shark of acquiring collections. And I can say that it is not our desire to keep projecting our worth as a matter of what we buy, what we have, but rather how we use the materials that we do. So, in terms of what we have at the Dylan archive, manuscripts are sexy. Recordings, unseen footage, especially when it's Bob Dylan, all of that is incredibly alluring. But being able to stitch all that together in a way that makes those materials, and Dylan's life and career, and the idea of creativity in general, to make those things sing is the challenge. You can do that with a small collection. It doesn't matter how big your collection is. It's how well you use it. Point being, the Leonard Cohen exhibit that has been in Montreal, it was in New York—brilliant. It wasn't based on sitting there and examining Leonard Cohen manuscripts under glass and having this "I'm looking at the Declaration of Independence" deal. It was (brilliant) because the media around it was so powerful. And you could have a display of incredible rock memorabilia under glass and have us all totally flat because there's no context and there's no life to it. It's just you looking at the bones of dead animals.

**DR:** So you're talking more about curation and presentation, and even a kind of analysis to present to viewers. Context. Can you sense a philosophy emerging from the Dylan Center about how this material might be presented?

**MD:** Yes. Another nice thing about our current stay-at-home situation is that we're having lots of meetings to discuss how to make the material that we have live and how to engage people where they are with Bob Dylan. Last year I guest-lectured in a class at the University of Tulsa and there were two dozen undergrads. I was

ten minutes into my lecture and somebody was like, “Hang on, uh, can you tell us who Bob Dylan is?” And I was like, “Oh. How many of you know who Bob Dylan is?” And two people in the class of maybe thirty students were like, “I know who he is,” and one of the two said, “Well, I googled him before class.”

**DR:** That's wild.

**MD:** The person who doesn't know who Bob Dylan is, we need to appeal to that person. We also need to appeal to of Dylan fanatic-level people. I think it's going to be impressive on any level, for anybody who comes in. Even if Dylan's style of music isn't interesting (to them), the presentation of the materials and the discussion of creativity and songwriting and the underlying philosophy of what it means to be someone who creates will come through.

**DR:** What is Michael Chaiken's role in this, and what is your working relationship with him?

**MD:** Michael is the curator of the Bob Dylan Archive. He's currently in quarantine in Brooklyn. He has been for some years working to bring artists and musicians and other actors, various characters to Tulsa to do events here and to do oral-history interviews with various people and to put on programming. He is on the front lines of talking with people when acquisitions are in front of us. He's been there since the beginning, so when the archive was sold, Michael essentially came with the archive. He helped sell it, and he had a knowledge of the materials that was so great in the way of talking about things. He has been a natural fit. Up until now, with the quarantine, he's been coming every month and splitting his time in Tulsa and in New York.

**DR:** What are the dynamics between the Dylan archive and the Tulsa community? There are so many entities involved, and you've brought up so many of them in the course of this interview. How does everyone ensure a positive and vital role for Dylan studies and Dylan tourism in Tulsa?

**MD:** The Bob Dylan Center will be the museum associated with Bob Dylan based on the materials from the Bob Dylan Archive, and you're right—culturally, especially in the arts district in Tulsa, there are a ton of things going on. There are a bunch of museums. There's the Woody Guthrie Center. There's going to be OKPop, the Oklahoma Historical Society's popular culture museum going in by Cain's. On the Dylan side of things, you have the Institute for Bob Dylan Studies at the University of Tulsa which is run by Sean Latham. And he put on the (World of Bob Dylan Symposium, 2019). He's been incredibly active with the institute and the board associated with the institute and, you know, what Sean is doing is separate from what we are doing with the Bob Dylan Center and the archive, but we work very closely with them in the same way that we work very closely with Dylan, his management team and that side of things.

**DR:** Before you moved to Tulsa, were you aware of the Tulsa Race Massacre (of 1921)? Had you encountered anything about it in your research?

**MD:** I'd heard about it, but not through my research or in school or anything. It's a truly heinous chapter in our nation's history, and it's one that has been historically under-reported. I think HBO's *Watchmen* series brought the story to a much wider audience, but the real reckoning is coming from Tulsa itself, in the run up to the centennial of the Massacre. So many people in the arts and cultural communities here in Tulsa have been working to honor the legacy of Greenwood/Black Wall Street and the lives lost and upended by the events in 2021. My colleague, Dr. Stevie Johnson, has been instrumental in organizing a regional hip-hop collective called "Fire in Little Africa," which tackles Tulsa's long history of racial division and the continued silencing of Black humanity. It's been a really inspiring project to watch come together and the album will launch early next year to coincide with the wider Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial commemorations.

**DR:** The Bob Dylan Center is moving into a space that was previously a museum. How did that come about?

**MD:** We were incredibly fortunate with the timing of it all. We'd been trying to decide where the Dylan Center would live when the Philbrook Museum decided it wanted to consolidate its collections at its main museum. The location offers us two museum-ready floors with archival storage, a library and reading room, and tons of options. And the fact that it's two doors down from the Woody Guthrie Center, and across from Guthrie Green makes it an ideal location for us.

**DR:** Is there anything else you think *Dylan Review* readers should know about the Bob Dylan Archive and the Bob Dylan Center, including how they interact with Bob Dylan's legacy and the Tulsa community?

**MD:** As I've mentioned, the Dylan Archive is incredibly rich and deep. It's changed the nature of Bob Dylan scholarship already in the short time it's been open to researchers. Numerous books and articles will be appearing in the coming years based upon the work that a handful of dedicated researchers have done here in Tulsa. That in itself is a boon for the city—it's become *the* critical hub for Dylan studies. With the opening of the Bob Dylan Center, the general public will be able to engage with these materials in a substantive manner. Part of the challenge there is offering enough for the diehards to be satisfied while also making sure that people with only a passing knowledge of Dylan can get a good idea of who he is and why he's so important. That in itself has been an incredibly rewarding challenge. And we want to ensure that this isn't a one-and-done museum experience—that people can come back again and again and see and discover new things. Undergirding all of this is Dylan's own restless creativity, and creativity and the creative process are the common themes for the entire Center, allowing us to look at creativity in a variety of ways. The Archive and Center are designed to be inspiring and thought-provoking to everyone who walks through the door.