

TRACING DYLAN

Something's missing in Dinkytown



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Voices

The Weekend Tourist



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SOMETHING'S MISSING IN DINKY TOWN

I'm sorry I didn't get to it sooner. This week's destination could have been a national historic site now but it's vanished.

A couple weeks ago I read about a new Dinkytown student housing project. I recognized the address on 15th Avenue SE — it was where Bob Dylan lived and recorded what's known as the "Minnesota Party Tape." I couldn't believe they were going to tear it down. Wasn't it a designated historic building? I ran over and sure enough, chain link fence surrounded the block. Turns out, it was never nominated for historic status and when the developers wanted to tear it down they got a thumbs-up. With all the talk about losing historic structures in Dinkytown this one disappeared without anyone noticing.

I know, you're probably thinking, "It was an ugly building, why should it have been saved?" Well, something important in our popular culture, and the culture of Minnesotans, happened there. Sometimes that's enough to designate a location historically significant. Carved ornament, architectural style, or being designed by an important architect aren't the only reasons for saving buildings — sometimes it matters what happened there. And something important happened at 711 15th Avenue SE.

When Robert Zimmerman came to Minneapolis from Hibbing in 1959 to attend the University of Minnesota he was 19 years old and still trying to find himself. He skipped classes, played folk songs in coffeehouses, and friends knew him as "Dillon." For part of his time in Dinkytown, the man who became Bob Dylan lived in the center unit of that two-story, non-descript rowhouse.

Another teenager, 15-year-old Cleve Pettersen,



An important site in the documentation of one of music's most influential performers is now a hole in the ground at 711 15th Avenue SE, Dinkytown. Photos by Linda Koutsky

hung around the same coffeehouses looking for musicians to record on his new reel-to-reel tape recorder. Bob Dylan agreed. In the fall of 1960 Pettersen went to 711 15th Avenue SE, up the front steps, and into the bay-windowed living room. Dylan and his friends Bonnie Beecher, Cynthia Fisher, and Bil Golfus had just opened a bottle of wine. With Pettersen holding the microphone Dylan played guitar and sang twelve songs. Pettersen never saw him again. Dylan moved to New York. Pettersen graduated from high school, attended the U of M for a while, moved to California, got married, had kids, but he held on to that tape. Every now and then he'd play it for friends, but he never made copies. I called him and told him the building was being torn down. He sounded sad, but mostly we talked about the tape. For 44 years he owned one of the very first recordings of Bob Dylan. Only two others are known to exist from the Dinkytown era. In 2004 Peterson decided to share his treasure with us and he donated the tape to the Minnesota Historical Society where you can listen to it in their library today.

So I decided to do just that. I headed to the History Center, signed up for a temporary library card, and requested Audiotape 203. A librarian brought out a small box containing a cassette tape (the original's kept in the vaults) then showed me to a table with a tape player

and headphones. The tape is about a half hour long. Songs include "San Francisco Bay Blues," "I'm a Gambler," "Talkin' Merchant Marine," and "Red Rosey Bush." It was amazing to listen to the casual, spontaneous, soon-to-be superstar.

Then I drove back to the apartment building. Right there was where it happened. I had driven past it a million times but I only knew it was Dylan's apartment the last couple years. In fact, not a lot of people knew the exact address. It's listed as across the street in at least one well-known Dylan book. But both Pettersen and Tony Glover, of the blues band Koerner, Ray, and Glover, and Dylan's friend and fellow harp player, verified the address. When I asked Glover about it he said: "There were earlier tapes in Hibbing and one in St Paul, but that apartment was where the first tape of young Bob that was heard by people here and there was made."

I stood looking at the building behind its chain-link fence. I had just listened to a live performance recorded on that very site 54 years ago. Within those walls history was being made. Bob Dylan was a scruffy, unknown kid from the Iron Range. His meteoric rise and enduring impact on music is immeasurable. Even if you're not a fan you have to appreciate his importance on our culture. And Minnesotans continually claim him as our own. Yet we ignored the opportunity to save this historic piece of property. It

could have made a great Bob Dylan museum.

But the dumpsters had arrived. In a last-ditch effort to save it, I wrote to the Preservation Alliance, newspapers, and TV stations. I even tried to convince someone at the Minnesota Historical Society to save the interior for a period room. Then I finally wrote to the developer. I knew I wouldn't convince them to stop, so I pleaded to get inside. I thought at least if I could take a few photos and maybe grab some scraps of wood as souvenirs there would be a physical reminder of the place. They were actually more accommodating than I could have imagined. Then on my way over I got a call — they'd uncovered asbestos. I couldn't go in. They saved some wood for me though at the construction trailer. So now I have a piece of Bob Dylan's floor. It's not a museum. And it's not something I can take tourists to and say, "this was the home and site of one of the earliest recordings of Bob Dylan," but it's my own little piece of history and I'll have to live with that.

Send your comments to
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Lunch break

The only remaining Dylan location in Dinkytown, though it's just a shell, is **Loring Pasta Bar**. Dylan lived on the second floor overlooking the alley when it was **Gray's drugstore**.