

[Long-lost photos capture a young Bob Dylan rubbing elbows in North Beach with Beat poets](#)

- [Paul McHugh, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

Tuesday, April 4, 2006



A photographic shoot of beatniks and hipsters could have been a mere footnote to the history of hip. But this morning session shot by two amateur shutterbugs near San Francisco's City Lights bookstore nailed a moment in America's cultural revolution of the 1960s: a meeting of minds between Beat poets and a new era's lead troubadour, Bob Dylan.

Yet, the output of only one photographer was widely distributed. An entire set of those images was lost for nearly 40 years. Recently unearthed, they headlined at a show in a Nevada City art gallery in February and March. The show put tears in the eyes of viewers as they peered through a portal to an idealistic and creative era -- as well as to their own vanished youth.

One young photographer on the scene that morning of Dec. 5, 1965, Larry Keenan, went on to fame as a chronicler of Beat, hippie and rock music scenes. (His shot of that alley session shows up in "Down the Highway," a 2002 Dylan biography.)

The other shooter, Dale Smith, had to leave photography within a few years because he developed an allergy to darkroom chemicals. His negatives from the shoot -- spontaneous images of Dylan, poets Allen Ginsberg and Michael McClure, as well as guitarist Robbie Robertson and many City Lights habitués -- slumbered in his files.

Smith had delivered prints to Dylan after the shoot. In 1985, one surfaced on the "Biograph" album. That was his sole score. In a bad move most folks will easily identify with, Smith figured that these highly important source negatives should be stored, not in a regular file, but in a very special place.

Afterward, he couldn't find them. Not until 2002.

"I had a slow day in my home office," recounts Smith, now a freelance designer and marketer operating from Nevada City. "I thought, what the hell, I'll clean up old files. After a few hours, I cracked open a binder of negatives to see unlabeled sheets. A few strips lay between those pages. I held them to the light. My heart pounded and I just went, 'Wow. My God. So, that's where they were hiding!' "

That long-ago December morning in 1965 was a charmed moment in the life of 24-year-old Robert Allen Zimmerman from Hibbing, Minn. - a.k.a. Bob Dylan. This new minstrel won startled notices, as if an angel had leaped onstage with his hair and clothes on fire. The "Times They Are a-Changin' " album was released in January 1964, "Another Side of Bob Dylan" in

An advertisement for Snoresville. It features a dark blue background with white cartoon illustrations of four people sitting in chairs. The text "snoresville —" is at the top left, and "to sensational" is at the bottom right. Below the illustrations, it says "REVIEWS • DVD's • CRITICAL CONSENSUS NEW FLICKS • MOVIE TIMES & THEATERS" and the website "www.sfgate.com/eguide/movies/".

August 1964, "Bringing It All Back Home" in March 1965 and "Highway 61 Revisited" only six months later. It was an astonishing burst of creativity.

Just a few months further along, in July 1966, Dylan's headlong charge at fame came to a literal, crashing halt when he wrecked his Triumph motorcycle on a road near his Woodstock, N.Y., home. He seized on that accident and its aftermath to reclaim his privacy, retiring into a secretive reclusiveness that's been a dominant trait ever since.

The Dylan in Smith's photographs taken in an alley outside City Lights is the artist still in pursuit of stardom, on the cusp of a dream before it slid toward a nightmare. He's dressed to the nines in the latest Carnaby Street fashion (acquired on a tour to Britain), with a polka-dot shirt, slacks, black jacket, bushy mane of hair, a lit cigarette and cool, hipster shades. He looks at ease, proud to be posing with two recent pals, star Beat poets McClure and Ginsberg.

"I sensed that Dylan was tickled pink to hang out with the Beats at this cool spot in San Francisco," said Therese Chudy, Smith's teenage girlfriend of the time. "He knew and accepted that he wasn't the big cheese at this particular scene. And Ginsberg in particular really enjoyed having him there."

Chudy, then 15, had met Dylan just before, at a party after his two-day gig at Berkeley Community Theater. She had chatted with him briefly about the album art on "Bringing It All Back Home," inquiring about the identity of the mysterious, elegant woman on the cover (it was Sally Grossman, wife of Dylan's new manager). Dylan was evasive in his response. But he certainly noticed Chudy.

Next morning, as she stood across the alley, she saw Dylan eyeball her and heard him mutter, "Who is that lollipop?" It was an example of another Dylan trait, ardent womanizing. But it made Chudy smile.

"Suddenly, I felt like the coolest chick on the block," she recalls.

How did relative upstarts like Keenan, Chudy and Smith wind up chronicling a morning in the life of the period's hottest rising star? An eddy in the roiling social ferment delivered them there.

McClure's paying job was as a teacher of creative writing at the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland. Two of his students were Keenan and Smith. McClure knew they also studied photography.

"Mike began inviting us on weekends over to his house in San Francisco's Haight, to hang out and take shots," Smith says. "We got to know him and all his friends, like Ginsberg and Philip Whalen. Ginsberg lived in a flat on Fell Street, right across from the Golden Gate Panhandle. Didn't have much in there, just a mattress, a table and a few dishes. But he did decorate it with pictures we'd taken. When Dylan visited, he noticed and liked the photos, and suggested we could make shots for his next album."

Ginsberg may have been gentle in person (Chudy remembers him as "very gracious and humble, not like a celebrity at all.") But as a promoter of the Beats, he was astute and driven.

"I don't think our Beat Generation would even be known as that, had it not been for Ginsberg," Lawrence Ferlinghetti said in a recent phone interview. Ferlinghetti founded City Lights, and is himself a major Beat poet and publisher. "You might say he put that whole concept together."

Without it, we might have been known, but only as individuals. Separate, great writers, scattered across the landscape."

Sunday, Dec. 5, 1965, began as an impromptu convention of Beat figures and poets outside City Lights, mobbing sidewalks of Columbus Avenue. The moment afterward got dubbed "The Last Gathering of the Beats."

That label thoroughly irritates Ferlinghetti. "The whole picture idea must have been Ginsberg's," he said. "I didn't hire those photographers or do anything to arrange it. But it's ludicrous to call it the 'Last Gathering.' For one, some notables were absent, like Gary Snyder. For two, we were all young and lively. There were lots of other gatherings afterward."

No question about the liveliness. Beat printer Andrew Hoyem arrived via ambulance, and waved heartily amid the mob while lying on a stretcher. He was not injured; he just felt like renting an ambulance as a taxi. "First time I've tried it, and I'm very satisfied," he informed a mystified Chronicle reporter.

Someone pulled a fire alarm, and a pair of hook-and-ladder engines, sirens blaring and lights flashing, zoomed onto the scene. Firefighters milled about until informed there was no blaze.

"I guess we all could have been put in jail for that," Ferlinghetti says coyly. "Do you think the statute of limitations has expired?"

Then Dylan and entourage arrived. He entered the bookstore but was soon besieged by fans. Dylan & Co. retreated to the basement, locking the door to the staircase behind them. Fans pounded on the door, demanding to be allowed in or for Dylan to come out. He did, but in an unexpected way. At the head of the stairs, an external side door let Dylan emerge into a lane, now called Jack Kerouac Alley. For the next 10 minutes, Smith and Keenan circled this briefly isolated group, shutters clicking.

"It actually was a perfect day for photography," Smith, 60, remembers. "We had a high fog, and light was diffused. I had one camera, a 35mm Pentax Spotmatic. I had one lens, a 50mm. And just one roll of film, the classic black-and-white Kodak Tri-X.

"I hadn't been studying photography very long. But as I look at these negatives, I realize, I must've really been on that day. Pure luck. It was the first time I'd ever shot a big music star. I loved Dylan. I felt in awe of the man and his songs. And the session had come together so fast, it was startling.

"We had them stand against a wall. They just started chatting with each other casually, as anyone would among friends. Later on, Dylan got to seem like a real wired-up guy. But that day he was so relaxed, confident and self-assured. People flowed in and out of our shoot: Robbie Robertson, Ferlinghetti and Julius Orlovsky -- the brother of Ginsberg's lover, who had just gotten out of a mental hospital.

"Another photographer, Jim Marshall, suddenly appeared at the end of the alley and snapped a shot, but Ginsberg held up his hand and shouted, 'You can't, it's their gig.' Then Dylan said, 'OK, that's enough.' And it was over."

In 2002, after Smith finally located his negatives of this epic shoot he named "The Alley Session," he initially didn't seek to do much with them. He donated a few prints to an environmental restoration group for use in a fundraiser. When a friend, structural designer Janis

Greenlee, gave him a blueprint for a new deck on his house, he rewarded her with another historic shot, of rocker Janis Joplin. Greenlee showed that to a pal, gallery owner Julie Baker. Impressed, Baker reviewed Smith's portfolio. She invited him to mount a show of the first photographs ever hung in her gallery. (The exhibition can still be seen online at www.juliebakerfineart.com/artists/smith/index.html)

Smith is now looking for a San Francisco gallery to present the show, which he titles "Memories in a Trunk," after a line from Dylan's song "Desolation Row." That's also a wry comment on the long period when the images lay hidden.

"I don't think Dale understood what he really had in those files," says Chudy, now a creative writing and English teacher for a Chico high school. "He's beginning to get it. That period has a special place in minds and hearts. Those pictures touch a chord, make us think about how we felt and how lucky we were to have such brilliant poets and singers speaking to us in such a deep and original way. Our culture has changed quite a bit since then."

"After I had the show put together," Smith acknowledges, "I finally appreciated how rare and amazing those events were. It's sobering to realize how few of those folks are still with us. The '60s had plenty of casualties. But it remains the favorite decade for a lot of people. That's when they really felt alive and in touch with what was happening. Or thought they were."

Or as Dylan himself describes the social ferment of the '60s in his autobiography, "Everyone seemed like somebody and nobody at the same time."

As a final coda on how things have changed since the days when two unknowns could court a star, Smith describes making prints of the session and bringing them to a show Dylan did in 2002 at Harrah's casino on Lake Tahoe's south shore. He asked the resort's director of entertainment, John Packer, to bring them to Dylan's road manager, with a request that Smith have a chance to meet Dylan after the show and make him a gift of the prints.

"So this is a guy who took these great pictures of Bob back in the day," Packer told the manager.

"No," the manager said. "He can't."

"Well, why not?" Packer persisted.

The manager eyed him. "Two words," he said. "John Lennon."

E-mail Paul McHugh at pmchugh@sfchronicle.com.

Page E - 1

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