

# Everybody loved the 'Kairdiff Kid'

Legendary reporter  
Dan O'Neill never  
looked back after  
captivating Bob Dylan

Stephen Jones

Here is an extract from a review of a Bob Dylan concert which took place in Sheffield in 1965. Be honest, you didn't expect that with your breakfast, did you. It is from *The Guardian*.

"Dylan's voice is not the voice of the traditional popular folk singer, that tortured bleater of chain-gang reminiscences. His void is a jeer, a protest. It is harsh. It is nasal. But it is intensely uncomfortably compelling and perhaps the only instrument that could match perfectly the vivid anguished lyrics that he creates."

The author was Dan O'Neill, a journalist from Cardiff. At the end of August he celebrated his 90th birthday with family and friends and less than a fortnight ago, after illness, he died. The story was told again –

that Dylan had loved the review, asked Dan to see him, and Dan was given a walk-on part in the Dylan film *Don't Look Back* soon afterwards.

Dan had three alter egos, no mean feat for a man who had no ego. Most famously, he was the "Kairdiff Kid" in the *South Wales Echo*. If you have ever heard a citizen of Cardiff pronounce the name of his home town you'll know where the Kairdiff spelling came from.

His column was a delight. You got the impression, from articles that were dutifully researched by Iwan ap Dafydd, of the National Library of Wales, that Dan was a less than fervent supporter of the Royal Family. "Listen, if you want vendettas what better targets than the nation's most dysfunctional family." Nor was he an aspiring bishop. "Religion is responsible for most of the barbarism appalling the world right now."

Dan knew his Cardiff pubs. He once noted in *The Echo* a campaign to save The Vulcan, which Dan claimed had "carefully scattered sawdust" on the floor and which had been opened in the 1850s. Dan refused to join, because he knew over well over 50

closed Cardiff pubs which had been opened well before The Vulcan, giving us addresses in Bute or Tiger Bay or Cathays, pinning them to the years of coal-mining eminence, or hardship or immigration.

One of his favourites was the Old Arcade, and in his international previews for rugby he often passed on gossip he had heard in there. He once ran into the same French supporter there three seasons running. "What's the French for déjà vu?" he asked.

The next alter-ego was Gareth Daniels, rugby reporter for this paper for more than 20 years. The languid air of the columnist was replaced by the blasting urgency to meet the menacing deadline.

His reports still make lovely reading. He loved the old grafters, like Bob Penberthy, who played a scarcely-credible 877 times for Pontypridd; he called Bob the "Bionic Elbow" because of Penberthy's crafty lineout shoving.

Dan was even prepared to admire Newport's David Waters, who played for his club on a mere 702 occasions. These days in the professional era

they ask the crowd to applaud if a player has appeared 50 times.

He also adored true rugby skills. He revered the fly half, Arwel Thomas, who had the size of a schoolboy and gorgeous touches. After Thomas was discarded, Dan was disdainful.

"We used to laugh at American footballers looking like a convention of Robocops. We ain't laughing now as our game gets more and more like that played on Super Bowl Sunday," he said. "But who cares as long as Wales win and as long as 17 stone Jamie Roberts flattens 13 stone George Ford in the channel? I do. I prefer (them) to lose a great running game by a single conversion than win a *Clash Of The Titans* by nine penalties to seven. Maybe I'm just an old romantic."

And indeed he was. He was also a clever, lovely, literate and magical man. In his guise as Dan, or as "The Kid" or as Gareth, everyone loved him. Bob Dylan merely got in early and was joined by a multitudinous throng.

His final nickname was "Buffer". He was known as that only to myself



O'Neill wrote memorable columns and adored true rugby skills

and my colleague, Steve Bale. The seating plan in Cardiff's media box always had me down next to the giant and boisterous figure of Clem Thomas, who wrote for *The Observer*.

Clem's mighty shoulders and sharp elbows would be swaying this way and that as my notes, pens, and composure disappeared down the steps of the stand.

Cruelly, I had a word with the man who did the ticketing. I asked him to swap Dan and I round. Next game, Dan was squashed in next to Clem.

In the end I confessed. He was the "Buffer" against Clem. But at least it gave him yet another idea. Clem was duly roasted in a forthcoming column – in beautiful style, as ever.