

Middletown man continues adding to one of world's largest Bob Dylan collections

By Andy Vineberg, staff writer | Posted: Tuesday, May 24, 2016 5:00 am

In his 75 years on this planet, Bob Dylan has officially released 137 studio and live albums, compilations and singles, but when you factor in all the different variations and editions around the world, not to mention all the rarities and bootlegs, the total is well into the thousands.

Mitch Barth would like to believe he owns every single one of them.

Ideally, he'd also like to own every poster, every book, every magazine, every concert handbill, every article of clothing — basically every piece of Dylan memorabilia ever created — although he's realistic enough to know that's *probably* not possible.

"I don't think you can get it all," Barth, 61, says from the basement of his Middletown home, where he proudly displays what is surely one of the largest individual Bob Dylan collections in the world.

"There are posters that are impossible to get. Even if I had an endless amount of money, I'm not sure I could get it done. Some things are so scarce, so hard to find.

"But I'm still going out there looking. I don't always get them, but I haven't slowed down too much."

Barth, owner of Positively Records in Levittown (named after Dylan's "Positively 4th Street," of course), has been a collector of all things Dylan since 1970. He was introduced to the music when a friend lent him a copy of 1970's "New Morning." He liked it enough to seek out some Dylan on his own and picked up 1966's "Blonde on Blonde."

"That was all she wrote," says Barth, whose three favorite Dylan songs are "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," "Desolation Row" and "Stuck Inside of Mobile With the Memphis Blues Again," the first song he says really grabbed him. "It was just the sound. Something strikes a chord in you, and you either go with it or not. What he had to say, the way he sang ... the combination of the two just took over.

"You buy all his records, and then you look for something else and you find out about these things called bootlegs, all this unreleased material, and you get into that. Then you've got these 45's with B sides on them, you buy a poster or two, a book or two, and pretty soon you've got a house full of



Mitch Barth enters his shrine to Bob Dylan on May 18, 2016, in the basement of his Middletown home.

stuff."

I wrote about Barth's basement shrine 12 years ago, and, on the occasion of Dylan's 75th birthday today, I thought it was the perfect time for a return visit.

I wouldn't have thought it possible back then, but his display has gotten considerably bigger and more impressive.

It begins with a wooden sign above the red basement door reading, appropriately enough, "Basement Tapes." Open the door, and you're immediately transported to the land of Dylan. There are platinum records on the wall to your left, framed posters for the 1967 Dylan documentary "Don't Look Back" on the wall to your right, red-vinyl promotional copies of five of Dylan's most iconic 1960s songs on the overhang in front of you, a concert shirt from 1975's Rolling Thunder Revue on the sloped ceiling above you and a framed replica poster promoting Dylan's first New York City concert (Nov. 4, 1961 at Carnegie Chapter Hall) on the inside of the door behind you.

All this before you've taken a single step.

Start down the curved staircase and you'll see such rare items as a 1960s cover of the magazine *Uncensored* hyping an article on the mysteries of Dylan, a ticket stub from Dylan's 1965 concert at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia, a handbill from his 1964 concert at Princeton's McCarter Theatre and Dylan's own unused artwork for "Ceremonies of the Horsemen," the original title of his 1974 album "Planet Waves."

Atop a table at the bottom of the stairwell are Dylan's three Hibbing High School (Minnesota) yearbooks from the late 1950s. In a small room to the left are Dylan jackets, hats, bags, bandanas and large cardboard cutouts.

But it's when you enter the main room of the basement that the scope of it all really hits you. Nearly every inch of wall and ceiling are adorned with records and images of Dylan from all phases of his career. There are racks and racks of vinyl records and CDs (25 different copies alone of his first best-of collection, 1967's "Greatest Hits"). Bottles of Dylan wine sit atop the stereo cabinet. A regulation-sized pool table is completely covered by records, books and oddities such as a jar of Traveling Wilburys peanut butter and jelly. An entire wall is filled with officially released 45s from throughout the world.

Barth lives with his girlfriend of 30 years, Suzanne Stubbs, who met him when she was a customer at his store's original location at the old I-95 Marketplace in Levittown. The couple has two cats, both named after people in Dylan songs (of course): Ma Rainey ("Tombstone Blues") and Ezra Pound ("Desolation Row").

Stubbs isn't nearly as enthusiastic a fan of Dylan as Barth is, but she supports and appreciates his passion.

"I love the colored discs and the pictured discs," she says. "Some of the things he brings home I have no real interest in, but it's still interesting to see all the stuff that's out there. It's a good hobby, it's a safe hobby. He enjoys it. And it always helps with the business."

Barth has zero idea how much he's spent over the last 45 years on his collection, which became easier to build up in the age of eBay. He was fortunate enough to get some rare items for free because he's in the business. And other times he got really, really lucky — most notably when he picked up an original vinyl pressing of 1963's "Freewheelin' Bob Dylan" for a couple of bucks at the Columbus Flea Market in the early 1980s.

That early version of the album, which includes four songs later dropped and replaced and was not meant for release, is worth as much as \$20,000.

Another Holy Grail among Dylan collectors is a test pressing of 1975's "Blood on the Tracks," which contains original versions of five different tracks before Dylan re-recorded them. Barth says it's worth about double the \$5,000 he paid for it.

"If you sold it piece for piece for what it's worth, you could probably buy another house ... or two," he says of his collection. "But I don't collect things for the investment; I'm just trying to be a completist."

A few valuable recent additions he's particularly proud of are an original poster listing the performers at the 1962 Ann Arbor Folk Festival at the University of Michigan (which spelled Dylan's name "Bob Dillon") and an early Columbia Records promotional poster touting Dylan as "America's Most Compelling Folk Artist" and featuring accolades from Joan Baez and Peter, Paul and Mary.

"I don't know anybody who has them," he says.

He also proudly showcases a signed Dylan guitar — one of only 140 of that particular model made. "The first five went to his band members; I got number six."

Barth does have his limits — he dropped out of bidding for an early poster listing a run of shows in San Francisco when it reached \$25,000.

Overall, though, the only significant thing missing from his collection is a tale or photo of meeting the man himself. Barth, who has seen Dylan in concert hundreds of times since attending his first show in 1974, came close once at the Tower Theater when fans were invited onstage, but he was stopped just before getting the chance to shake Dylan's hand. (He does have a photo with Dylan's son, Jakob of the Wallflowers, however).

Though he's not a huge fan of Dylan's second consecutive album of American standards, the recently released "Fallen Angels," Barth is still planning on seeing him in concert three times later this year.

If he somehow ever did meet Dylan, he doubts he'd tell him about his collection.

"He wouldn't care a lick," he says.

Barth, who grew up in the Bronx, attended high school in Willingboro, New Jersey, and college at Trenton State before settling in Bucks County, has really only stopped collecting once, when he suffered a heart attack two years ago. But he's healthy again and back on the prowl for whatever Dylan memorabilia is still out there to be had.

"I've been fortunate enough, the record business has given me a good living, and I've been able to buy things without hurting my family," he says. "And you know, a guy needs a hobby."