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The times they are a-changin'

The Boston Globe

August 30, 2005

Bob Dylan used to play coffeehouses. That's the rumor. Today, he goes back to his roots. Sort of. Starbucks, the brewshop everybody loves to hate -- while continuing to scarf down its venti frappuccinos -- will be the only place Dylan fans can buy the much-bootlegged but never before released 1962 Gaslight Cafe show.

For local record stores, this kind of exclusive arrangement -- the Dylan deal is for 18 months -- is more than annoying. Witness the repeated complaints from, among others, Newbury Comics boss Mike Dreese. Why do Dylan and Alanis Morissette want to sell out to Starbucks? But record industry wonks, desperately fighting for survival, can smell the sumatra.

"What they're doing is moving aggressively into music retailing and utilizing their remarkable power and leveraging their unique relationship with their customers to sell music," says Jason Flom, president of Lava Records, who struck a deal with Starbucks to sell discs from a new band, Antigone Rising. More than 60,000 CDs were sold at Starbucks the first six weeks. "I'm delighted. There's a limited amount of space in the stores and tens of millions of people who go through there every week. You'd be hard pressed to say you're not thrilled they've chosen music."

And choose, they do. Not only are the barristas stocking the shelves. Through the Starbucks stereo, they're able to play you music that's not for sale.

Each in-store player "allows us to play a physically-larger proprietary CD in our stores, which holds three separate compilations of songs," according to spokeswoman Elisa Wiefel. (Is that why we keep hearing Stevie Wonder's "Songs in the Key of Life"?)

Will Starbucks become the Tower Records of the 21st century? Not if the company's entertainment boss, Ken Lombard, can help it. Some Starbucks stores are getting satellite radio booths. Others will get special media bars. But don't expect more than a sampling of discs.

"We're here for those 33 million customers a week worldwide that make up a huge part of the disenfranchised customer base, who

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don't even know where to buy the music if they hear it," says Lombard. "But our customers are not going to walk into their favorite Starbucks store and feel as if it's been converted into a music store."

Ain't that the truth.

The Dylan CD, for example, might seem like a frothy treat. But it offers just 10 of the 17 songs in the Gaslight set. And on the same day the Starbucks disc hits the shelves, Columbia/Legacy offers a different, and much better, two-disc Dylan collection. "The Bootleg Series Volume 7: No Direction Home" -- which includes a high-school-age Dylan singing in 1959 and a mother lode of outtakes from his mid-'60s work -- might even help you forget that Robert Allen Zimmerman already sold out at least once before, to Victoria's Secret.

GEOFF EDGERS ■

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