Living In the Age of Bob Dylan

By Gavin Lance Garcia

In this golden age when American popular culture is a worldwide culture, Bob Dylan is in many ways its fons et origo (its spring and source). “It’s an immense privilege to live at the same time as this genius,” states British literary critic and former Oxford Professor of Poetry, Christopher Ricks.

On the eve of his August 16th concert date in Austin—a community which has adopted Dylan as one of its own—TODO Austin has invited three American scholars to reflect on Dylan’s wide cultural impact.

One sure sign of Dylan’s influence is that all three scholars, a noted University of Texas at Austin English professor and poet, a UT MacArthur fellow who studies ancient Greek culture and the human response, including song, to war and violence, and a Harvard professor who is the world’s foremost authority on the Roman poet Virgil and the later influence of classical literature and culture, include Dylanology among their prime areas of interest.

From Osaka, Japan to Oslo, Norway, from Rio de Janeiro to the Rubber Bowl in Akron, Ohio, from Istanbul to the Isle of Wight, Dylan has performed his unique distillation of American musical traditions. His music transcends time and place and crosses cultural boundaries. Around the world and up and down Highway 35, Dylan remains the most important artist alive today, “anywhere and in any field,” to quote England’s Poet Laureate, Andrew Motion.

I had the honor of presenting the key to the City of Austin to Dylan on February 24, 2002, Bob Dylan Day. In our short visit, Dylan expressed then to the mayor pro-tem and me how happy he was to have been made an honorary Texan by the previous Governor.

Welcome, home, Bob.

"I was young when I left home / But I been out a-ramblin’ round / And I never wrote a letter to my home" -Bob Dylan, "I Was Young When I Left Home," performed in Bonnie Beecher’s Minneapolis apartment (December 1961) © 2005 by Special Rider Music


"There’s a lonesome freight at 6.08 coming through the town, / And I feel like I just want to travel on" - Bob Dylan, "Gotta Travel On," Self Portrait (1970) performed in Karen Wallace’s St. Paul, MN apartment May, 1960, copyright by folksinger Paul Clayton

"As I travel on life’s pathway / I know not what the years may hold / As I ponder, hope grows fonder / precious mem’ries flood my soul" - Bob Dylan, "Precious Memories," Knocked Out Loaded (1986) composed ca. 1935 Aunt Molly Jackson

"But me, I’m still on the road / Headin’ for another joint" - Bob Dylan, "Tangled Up in Blue," Blood on the Tracks (1975) © 1974 by Ram’s Horn Music; renewed 2002 by Ram’s Horn Music

"I wouldn’t change it, even if I could / You know what they say / It’s all good" - Bob Dylan, "It’s All Good," Together Through Life (2009) © 2009 by Special Rider Music and Ice-Nine Publishing

The cover on Bob Dylan’s latest CD, aptly titled, for longtime Dylan fans, "Together Through Life" (2009), uses the magic of a black-and-white photograph from Bruce Davidson’s 1959 Brooklyn Gang series to take us back fifty years to the starting point of Dylan’s career. Davidson’s camera has us in the front seat of a big old sedan. We crane our necks to look at a young couple making out in the back seat as the car moves down a divided four-lane highway.

The photo puts us out on the road, right where most of us, as descendants of immigrants or immigrants ourselves, want or need to be. Our American heroes, old and new, have to move, have to go, have to explore the unknown, face new realities, dream new dreams, confront new and old problems, meet strange faces, try to discover who and what and why they, and we, are. They are loners, by choice or by necessity, and they come to terms with their aloneness each and every day. Just close your eyes and listen in your mind to Dylan’s early hero Hank Williams sing of the lonesome whippoorwill, time crawling by through too long a night, a tearfully disconsolate moon, a weeping robin, and a lone falling star in a purple sky. In four magical stanzas, Williams gives voice to how it feels when “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry.”

Songsters in the big and heterogeneous American popular musical tradition, of which Dylan is arguably the greatest active student and practitioner these last fifty years, also know that we can journey without putting the key in the ignition or taking a single step. Songs and thoughts and memories take us on trips. When “there is no place (we’re) goin’ to,” we can be “disappearin’ through the smoke rings of (our) mind(s),” as Dylan puts it in “Mr. Tambourine Man.” We can move by talking, as Dylan sings on

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30TH ANNUAL TEJANO MUSIC AWARDS: DO YOU WANNA TEJANO?
By Bowen Wilder

The red carpet was rolled out in the Alamo City on July 11 to celebrate the biggest names and talents in Tejano music. The 30th Annual Tejano Music Awards brought out fans who waited hours in the blistering hot sun through the afternoon in hopes of autographs, pictures, or to catch a glimpse of their favorite Tejano musicians and celebrities in attendance. Elida Reyna, Jay Perez, Michael Salgado, Veronica Sustaita and the entire Quintanilla family were just a few of the industry staples who excited the crowd at the sold-out event.

Local Austin favorites Ruben Ramos, AJ Castillo and Los Texas Wranglers were nominated for awards, with Castillo walking away with the prize for Best New Male Artist. Special tribute was paid to Selena featuring Girl in a Coma performing a punk rock version of “Si Una Vez,” complemented by David Archuleta of American Idol fame performing a personalized version of “Como La Flor.” Another highlight saw the Texas Talent Musicians Association (TTMA) bestow upon La Mafia a lifetime achievement award for 30 years of entertainment.

During a performance tribute of their signature songs, La Mafia was joined by none other than the “Garth Brooks of Tejano Music,” Emilio. After two years of rehabilitation from a life-threatening car crash, Emilio’s first public performance produced many a moist tissue, and received a standing ovation.

Even so, some fans were less interested in Tejano music and more interested in getting David Archuleta to sign a copy of his new book, “Chords of Strength.” The presence of renowned film director Robert Rodriguez (Predators) and Mexican-American actor Danny Trejo (Machete) sparked increased interest among the crowd. From the pre-show red carpet walk, a majority of artists milled about in relative anonymity. The question on many lips was whether Tejano music’s popularity is in a steady declining and lives: “I could tell he was very lonesome, very alone and very lost out in his time.”

Davidson’s Brooklyn Gang photos freeze the kinds of images that social-realist films, like “Blackboard Jungle” with Glenn Ford (1955) or “The Wild One” with Marlon Brando (1953), gave the young Bob Dylan, and still give us. Those films portray restless youths out setting, striking out, rebelling, defying the static status quo, as if by some kind of biological imperative inherited from their parents on shorter or taller immigrant family trees. As Brando’s motorcycle-gang character replies in “The Wild One,” when asked, “Hey, Johnny, What are you rebelling against?” “What’ve you got?”

The music on “Together Through Life” has the inventive and spontaneous quality of a Chess Records session, of blues or conjunto musicians out on their back-road and wrong-side-of-the tracks circuits playin’ with and for different locals every night. And Dylan in concert follows the ways of wandering troubadours in the Middle Ages, whose very name means they have to ‘find’ or ‘invent’ new ways of realizing their distinctive songs each and every night.

In 1959, Dylan, a high school senior himself, was heading out and confronting some of life’s hard realities and big questions. On January 31 of that year at the Duluth Armory, Dylan heard Buddy Holly sing. Three days later, Holly was dead. As David Hajdu captures it, Holly, along with 29-year-old Hank Williams and 24-year-old James Dean, was “the third of Dylan’s youthful heroes to be immortalized by a premature death while traveling.” Dylan’s brother tells us the three deaths affected Dylan deeply.

As Dylan comes to town now he has been for more than twenty years on what his fans, full of hope, call The Never Ending Tour. He is now in the days of 69 as we reckon life in human years. He is playing again with Charlie Sexton, the latest in a series of Austin-based musicians, like Denny Freeman and Doug Sahm, with whom he chooses to play.

As Dylan has, in the songs he sings and those he writes, dreamed of Columbus’ three ships a-sailin’ his way and of longing for old friends “while riding on a train going west.” He has been on horseback with Black Jack Davey, out on the trail of the buffalo, and with Pancho in the desert down in Mexico. He has been seen riding in a buggy in Baltimore with Miss Mary Jane. And he has used all eight carburetors despite being short on gas.

We are lucky to have been along through all these rides and bucked still that he is bringing it all back home to us right in our own Backyard. (For Tom Palaima’s other writings on music and Bob Dylan go to: http://www.utexas.edu/research/pasp/publications/dylan/dylana.html)
Welcome Home, Bob
from
TODO Austin

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