Texas-Oklahoma singer-songwriter Jimmy LaFave passed away last May. Jimmy was steeped in the music of Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan. He was a prime mover in the national tour celebrating Woody Guthrie's life, music, thoughts and social commitment, captured on CD as "Ribbon Of Highway Endless Skyway: Tribute to Woody Guthrie" (Music Road Records ASIN: B001P9WHNS). LaFave also covered many Dylan songs on his commercially released recordings. I had him into my honors seminar at the University of Texas at Austin on music as social criticism to discuss who Guthrie was and what his songs meant then and mean now.

One song LaFave returned to again and again in concert, as we all do in our minds and souls, is Dylan's 'Love Minus Zero / No Limit'. At several shows, LaFave, with good humour, asked me from the stage what this song is about. I finally decided I would put my mind to it.

Dylan has many spectacular love songs. Lots of love gone wrong songs. Lots of joyous love gone right songs. In concert Dylan has played cover songs like 'I Forgot More Than You'll Ever Know' and '20-20 Vision'. And many of us think no other song about the power of love will ever surpass 'Love Sick'. Who knows what Victoria's Secret customers think 13 years later?

Kinky Friedman told me the one time that "inside Bob Dylan is a little Jewish guy who just wants to make money and get laid." Maybe. But we are all multi-dimensional and have lots of conflicting impulses and emotions. And love is about money and pleasure. Dylan critics acknowledge that 'Love Minus Zero / No Limits' is a love song of considerable power. But is what is it about exactly?

The key is that Dylan in a 1965 (Newcastle May 9) concert introduced the song from the stage by title—an oddity, since he, like most singers, and unlike poets (as Christopher Ricks observes), rarely refers to songs by their titles. He then said that it was "a sort of fraction." And indeed it is. Ricks and others have puzzled over the meaning of the fraction, finding it somehow inescrutable. I think I know, and not because my head tells me, but my heart.

Andy Gill remarks, "The first verse is as close as Dylan gets to amorous infatuation, marvelling at a lover of elemental constancy and rocklike imperturbability, one whose emotional strength is not dependent on overt displays of emotion, but on some deeper, inner fortitude."

This hits the mark. Who among us doesn't know the wonderful moment in love when words are not necessary, when there is just a peace and connection that transcends the need to talk, a kind of certainty and calm that is itself a form of speaking? To be true like ice and fire simultaneously, what Gill calls elemental love. We who have lesser ways with words would say something like her love is rock solid. (Paul Simon: "She loves me like a rock.") But to have it be as cold as cold can be and as hot as hot can be at the same time. Whew! That is elemental.

Dylan's love also knows that the trappings of love, roses, declarations of true love, valentines, are not where love truly is. And Dylan again subverts our expectations by having his love laugh not 'at' the flowers but 'like' them, the wonderful, rose-petal softness when a true love laughs.

The other verses lay out what people out in the world, who have no inclination or too little time to think and feel, accept as substitutes for reality, for knowing, and for real love. Snippets out of books, stolen quotations, idle discussion, bus station graffiti, statues of match sticks, Melvish-like skulduggery, and the expectations of the daughters of the rich and powerful that their love can be purchased and the price they set is a false image of 'a perfect life', the kind of marriage John Fogelberg's old lover describes in 'Same Old Lang Syne', one that keeps her 'warm and safe and dry.' Of course, Dylan doesn't lecture us and lay out a rational argument, but he gives us his images.

Dylan knows, as he sings in 'High Water' and in many other songs, that "it's rough out there." So his closing image—with a nod to Edgar Allan Poe—is of winds and rain storming outside; and his love, out in the callous and stupid world, is like a raven at his window and would not be unharmed by the world's blows (her "broken wing"). The metaphor is simple and stark. He is inside and she is there outside. The window is a barrier between them. She is waiting to be let in. Or perhaps she is not waiting at all.

Perhaps she can survive out there, because of her magnificent strength and stoic understanding. Perhaps she is waiting for him to come out. For him to be courageous enough to abandon his "shelter from the storm" and step out into what Dylan apostrophizes in the blunt and numbing closing lines of 'Percy's Song' as 'Oh the Cruel Rain / and the Wind'.

The point about the song that throws critics for a real loop is what does the denominator of the fraction mean? Love Minus Zero is understandable. Love without anything subtracted. Love whole and complete. But divided by no limit? i.e., by infinity? To me, the koan of this part of the title means that true love is indivisible and un-subtractable. It is a whole. It cannot be diminished. And it cannot really be increased. That is only an illusion. We only metaphorically say that we can pile it on and on and on, as Dylan does in 'You, Angel, You': "If this is love, give me more and more and more and more." Yet what makes it a koan or conundrum is the equation also implies that indivisible love is also infinitely divisible.

True love so transforms and invades us that our every breath and our every action are a giving out of a parcel of love. We literally give away pieces of it to others and we never exhaust it. It is there in the kind smile, the thoughtful gesture, the caring act, the help we offer, the knee-jerk anger we suppress, the sacrifices we make, because love is in us.

I wish, when I had first heard this song and the next hundreds of times I listened to it, I had thought about it. This one song, like Jimmy LaFave's 'Only One Angel', tells us some things that are so true they almost defy conscious thought and reasoning. That is why they need to be sung.
BOB DYLAN & THE FIFTH DAY OF MAY
by John Baldwin

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