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Bob Dylan Reminds Us of Our Common Dreams

by Tom Palaima

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Just over two years ago Bob Dylan offended many old fans by appearing in a Victoria's Secret lingerie ad. Victoria's Secret outlets sold a special compilation of his painfully honest love songs, spanning some thirty-five years of his experiences with life and love. He stood accused of selling out. A few voices were raised in his defense, including mine right here at Common Dreams.

Well, Bob Dylan is breaking the hearts of Americans again, mainly those born between 1925 and 1955, and he is doing so on a weekly basis. If you are smart, you will give him a chance to break yours. Let me explain.

Take a look around. In the 1930's through the 1960's, an empowered federal government, its protective laws, unions, effective consumer-advocacy groups, graduated taxes, and the Supreme Court pulled us out of the Great Depression; enforced protections for workers and all citizens against the hiring, labor and sales practices of big corporations; and overrode states-rights-based racial discrimination against minorities. The Supreme Court also gave women some control over their own bodies and lives. We won a major world war by uniting behind it, paying for it, and engaging in universal symbolic citizen sacrifice: "Bye, Bye. Buy Bonds. Save Chicken Fat. And Join the WACS." We protested against an undeclared war in a distant land, and again relied upon the judicial system to make sure that the executive branch of government did not act against or beyond the law.

These lessons are now forgotten. These achievements are undone or under attack. We are waging a large-scale undeclared preemptive war by raising our debt, not our taxes. The U.S. senator from Texas, John Cornyn, denigrates the U.S. Supreme Court, declaring that five people, also known as a majority of Supreme Court justices, should not determine what the people of his state can do about the American flag, or, by implication, any other such issue. This is a shameless act of divisive political pandering by a former justice of the Texas Supreme Court, who has sold his soul now to Karl Rove's political strategizing.

Life is rootless and impersonal. Citizens feel powerless. With hundreds of cable stations, we no longer share a common experience at the one communal hearth we used to have: television. Remember three national networks, Huntley and Brinkley and Uncle Walter Cronkite? People are entrusting the most important aspect of their lives to services like selectivesearch-inc.com. It promises to "take the labor out of finding love" by applying to personal lives the vetting process methodology that is "so effective in corporate America."

And now Bob Dylan breaks our hearts. How? By his weekly Theme Time Radio broadcasts on XM satellite radio, warm evocations of old-timey radio. In each hour, Mr. Dylan covers a chosen theme: Mothers, Fathers, Baseball, Coffee, Weddings, Divorce, showing how the common musical traditions of the United States shaped our lives in song and lyric. The broadcasts are one-hour lessons in the history of who we were and are.

Mr. Dylan's succinct commentary makes the music shine. He is witty, gently humorous, erudite and always reverent about the music he is playing. We hear the sounds of big band, country swing, rock-a-billy, blues, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, jazz, Nashville, MoTown, Sun Records, Frank Sinatra, the Ink Spots, Bob Wills, Prince La La, Dirty Red, and Kitty Wells. Interspersed he gives plainly spoken information about the artists, where they came from, where they went, who influenced them and what influence they had. He recites lyrics, painting pictures of our lives in sound.

Mr. Dylan doesn't peddle himself or anything else. No product placement here. Period commercials are spliced in to set the mood. A listener asks on Theme Time Coffee: "Why do you play so much old

music? Do you have something against new music?" Mr. Dylan replies, "I like new music. But there's more old music than new music."

Mr. Dylan retrieves many classics and brings to light many should-be-classics. On Theme Time Mothers, he plays Buck Owens' "I'll Go to Church with Mama," and tells us an old joke from Buck's t.v. show "Hee Haw." He spins Ernie K. Doe's 1961 chart-topper "Mother-in-Law," and LL Cool J's "Mama Said Knock You Out," explaining its ultimate origins in the African-American insult-song contests known as the "dozens".

Theme Time Radio is hip, but not Tarantino's jaded hip, or William Shatner's self-mocking hip. Mr. Dylan respects the music we and he loved. He respects the artists who created it, even lived it.

Mr. Dylan tells us that Billy Stewart, who poured his soul into his version of the Gerschwin Brothers' "Summertime," died in a cars crash at age 32, in the summer time. And Bobby Hebb wrote the beautiful "Sunny" overwhelmed by the assassination of JFK and the death of his own brother in a knife fight the very next day. Hebb needed to pour his soul into something good in life, a song, and then pour it back out for us.

Another listener writes that she likes to listen to baseball broadcasts at night, but that bothers her boyfriend. Mr. Dylan's solution, "Put the radio under your pillow and rest your ear on the pillow. That's what it's made for." Remember listening to ball games like that, or music programs from distant cities at night? These shows are so humane, so out of time, they will break your heart.

Bob Dylan is still protesting. He is protesting our fast-paced, dehumanized present by calling us to gather round the hearth of old time radio. He is reminding us that we are in this thing called life together and that America is many different voices. Stop and listen to Theme Time Radio. Listen to life in all its crazy beauty.

Theme Time radio reminds us that we share common problems, common sorrows, common joys and common dreams..

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