

## Times have changed, but Bob Dylan still reflects a restless America

By Thomas G. Palaima

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'Folk songs are the way I explored the universe. They were pictures and the pictures were worth more than anything I could say, I knew the inner substance of the thing. I could connect the pieces.' - Bob Dylan, 'Chronicles Volume One'

When Bob Dylan steps on stage, he brings America with him. America in song images, shrouded in "darkness at the break of noon" and bright with "silver singing rivers." The beauty, blindness and betrayal of love. Small people up against big forces. Simple women and men lost in a world gone wrong. Russell Lee photos translated into words and melodies.

Bob Dylan is our quintessential oral folk poet, in the original Greek sense, a "maker" of "things that are made." Like the first great Western songster, Homer, Dylan takes from old songs and makes new ones, and then keeps remaking them. In 1995, Dylan said, "I've been working on some songs for 20 years, always moving toward some kind of perfection." He is still changing the words and music of songs lesser singer-songwriters would view as fixed masterpieces.

Oral folk and blues poets reveal our world to us as we would not see or feel it without their songs. Dylan is no different. He sings about users, cheaters, six-time losers; buffalo skinners, made murderous by a bankrupt law; God matter-of-factly commanding Abraham, "Kill me a son"; Hattie Carroll slain by a cane; a clean-cut kid sent off to a "napalm health spa"; a never-will-be lover lamenting, "All the friends I ever had are gone." It's rough out there. High water everywhere.

To paraphrase Dylan some more, this is a burden too heavy to be his. So he changed his name from Robert Allen Zimmerman to one he got from who cares where. And he has used other names, too: Elston Gunn, Blind Boy Grunt, Alias, Lucky, Boo, Jack Fate.

As Dylan told Allen Ginsberg in an interview, "Nobody's Bob Dylan." But Nobody was also the disguise-name of Homer's Odysseus, the archetypal wandering jokerman on his own Never Ending Tour. And Homer's name was made up, too.

Dylan has said that he is a spokesman for no one, that his songs are not about or for other people, that the music he makes would be real even if no one were listening.

Let's take him at his word. Still he has a preternatural gift for creating and performing songs in an unequalled range of styles.

When we listen to Dylan's bleaker songs, his empathic voice and the moods of his sounds make the hardness and the longing real. Dylan's lyrics are the third big part of his art. His words can be profoundly simple, like Willie Nelson's. Or they can come at us in cascades of images, like T.S. Eliot on speed. He has seen and felt a lot during a life outside the normal stream.

Dylan's outsider perspective fills his songs with twists that change our take on our own lives. Who else would tell the woman he loves, "(I) like your smile / And your fingertips / Like the way that you move your lips. / I like the cool way you look at me. / Everything about you is bringing me / Misery"? Yet we know how that feels.

One small moment in concert captures for me Dylan's uncanny talent, as an oral poet, to invent in the moment. It also shows that he is, at times, acutely aware of his audience.

Performing in Paris in April 2002, Dylan begins singing "Desolation Row" early in his set. In the third stanza, after the slightest pause for emphasis, he sings the name of the hunchback's cathedral en français, pronouncing Notre Dame to rhyme with "Tom." Two lines later he delivers the coup de grâce, singing "rain," the normal rhyming word paired with "Dame," as "ron," so that they rhyme in Dylanesque French. The Parisian audience completely loses its characteristic reserve.

Dylan's protean spirit can move him on stage to sing the spiritual "I Am the Man, Thomas" and Buddy Holly's "Not Fade Away" in the same set. In his own compositions, we can hear echoes of Hank Williams, Blind Willie McTell, Woody Guthrie, Charlie Patton, Willie and Ricky Nelson, Doug Sahm, the Stanley Brothers, the Mississippi Sheiks, Little Willie John, Big Joe Williams, Elizabeth Cotten, Jimi Hendrix, Stephen Foster, Joe South, Tom Petty, Paul Clayton, Chuck Berry, Merle Haggard, Lightnin' Hopkins and Memphis Minnie.

Dylan's song repertory extends back "time out of mind." His first recordings, in 1959-63, when he was just college age, drew upon Scottish and English folk ballads and American regional folk and blues songs. Thirty years later, in 1992-93, Dylan baptized himself again in those same waters, filling two CDs with heartfelt solo acoustic versions of ignored or forgotten classics. He had just received a Grammy lifetime achievement award that he half took as a challenge, that people thought his significant work was behind him.

Dylan also clearly enjoys playing with a band, whether it is rock 'n' roll with Tom Petty or G.E. Smith, the rural music of Bucky Baxter's mandolin and steel guitar, the eclectic blues, R&B, folk, country, rock, classical and jazz mix of Charlie Sexton or his current stripped-down blues-inflected "cowboy band" with Denny Freeman on lead guitar. Keep in mind where and when Dylan comes from, and his eclecticism does not seem so strange.

### **'Being inhabited by a god'**

'Very seldom you hear real songs anymore. Well, we were lucky to grow up, when you could hear them all the time. All you had to do was switch on the radio and you could hear them.' -Bob Dylan, concert talk Feb. 24, 1986

Dylan was born six months before Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. His family moved from Duluth to Hibbing, Minn., five years later. What music was the child who was the father to Bob Dylan listening to in the late '40s and '50s?

Big band music. Clinch Mountain Boys bluegrass. Merle Travis' 1946 country hit "Dark as a Dungeon," performed by Dylan in concert in the '70s and '90s, with its searing Dylanesque images of the addictive plight of poor coal miners around Ebenezer, Ky.: "Like a fiend with his dope and a drunkard his wine / a man will have lust for the lure of the mines."

Perry Como's 14 No. 1 pop singles between 1945 and 1958, from "Prisoner of Love" to "Catch a Falling Star." Big Bill Broonzy's courageously controversial "Black, Brown and White." Little Richard's hyperkinetic cocktails of boogie-woogie, R&B and gospel. Elvis swiveling through Big Mama Thornton's "Hound Dog."

Dylan absorbed it all. His transistor radio was pulling in at night blues, folk and country tunes on faraway AM stations. How welcome the emotional heat of all this music must have been in a little Minnesota town where, as Dylan recalls, it was too cold to commit crime.

When the twentysomething Dylan decided hothouse folk protest music would not solve America's social injustices, rock 'n' roll and R&B were also in his tool box for expressing his unique poetic gifts.

Bob Dylan is too big a theme for anyone, even Dylan himself, to take on. His songs reflect America's restless energy, as we lurch onward, trying to convince ourselves that God is on our side and the slow train really isn't coming. Rosa Parks and Joseph McCarthy, the Bay of Pigs invasion and the Peace Corps were the real America when Dylan came of age. Things have changed. Dylan's song-poems have changed with them, and they keep on changing.

Socrates thought that ancient Greek poets could not explain their own art because they created their songs through a mysterious process that the Greeks called "enthusiasm."

The word means "being inhabited by a god." That sounds like a good enough explanation for the art of Bob Dylan and other American popular musical geniuses who have enriched our lives, like Robert Johnson, Hank Williams, Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson, Frank Sinatra, James Brown.

The inspiration behind Bob Dylan's music might be the devil and it might be the Lord, but it serves us very well.

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### **Austin musicians on Dylan**

'You listen to Dylan and you say, "Who is this guy and where do these songs come from?" Maybe he writes a bunch of stuff and throws a lot of it out. But what he shares with us, they're all keepers.' - **Carolyn Wonderland**

'Dylan is like Barton Springs. It doesn't matter where you dive in. It's great. ... Dylan swims in currents that would drown most artists.' - **Paul Minor**

'My favorite song is "You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go," because of the way he perfectly captures both longing and loss without trying very hard. It expresses a very deep human emotion in a beautifully simple way, making the emotion we are all familiar with much more understandable while not selling it short.' - **Rachel Loy**

'I try to write what I would actually say. I like Dylan's "Desire" album. I like its rawness and how its lyrics are conversational.' - **Brian Keane**

'(My) favorite (Dylan) line is "They say patriotism is the last refuge / To which a scoundrel clings. / Steal a little and they throw you in jail, / Steal a lot and they make you king." I'd like to have just one line like that in my body of work. ... I still consider "Blonde on Blonde" and "Highway 61 Revisited" masterpieces. They both had the blend of personal/politics/mystery/musicality mixed with that sense of pushing past the boundaries of everything known up to that point in folk rock music.' - **Eliza Gilkyson**

' "The Times, They Are A-Changin" is my favorite album. Something about it is so intimate. Full of dread and hope. (It has) a timeless quality.' - **Colin Gilmore**