

A Classical Bard Brings It All Back Home

By Tom Palaima

"Everybody movin' if they ain't already there / Everybody got to move somewhere" -Bob Dylan, "Mississippi," Love and Theft (2001) © 1997 by Special Rider Music

"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

"I pity the poor immigrant / Who wishes he would've stayed home" -Bob Dylan, "I Pity the Poor Immigrant," John Wesley Harding (1967) © 1968 by Dwarf Music; renewed 1996 Dwarf 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 / 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 man, 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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"Together Through Life," to our own forgetful hearts, or trying to "remember the sound of (our) own name(s)." For as Willie Nelson reminds us, too, "still is still movin'."

And we can be moved by our imagination. In Davidson's photo, we could be in a car with Jack Kerouac in the early 50's. Or it could be December, 1960. We could be riding with Bob Dylan in Fred Underhill's car, heading east from Madison, Wisconsin to New York City, aiming to visit his idol and icon and biggest early role model, Woody Guthrie, at Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital in northeast New Jersey.

Until the inherited disorder of the nervous system known as Huntington's chorea permanently institutionalized Guthrie during the last 13 years of his life, he was the quintessential hard traveler. During the Great Depression and into the 1940's, Guthrie was out on the roads singing of and among the faceless and nameless people most of us are and certainly all of us, but a chosen few, eventually become.

Dylan paid homage to Guthrie's wandering ways in his early-60's "Song for Woody." But, like Hank Williams, Guthrie and his music stirred Dylan to face the existential question we all face in our shallowly rooted and ever-changing American

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-realism 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 setting out, 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.

Still, Dylan later reminisced with Robert Shelton that, during the summer after graduating from high school, he hit the road to a Colorado mining town that opened a new world for him. The place and its stories took him back in his imagination 100 years to 1859 when gold was first struck there. He gets across his re-imaginings, when performing the old standard mining song "Days of '49."

In the fall of '59, Dylan headed to the University of Minnesota campus. In its Bohemian Dinkytown district, he immersed himself in roots music with roots musicians. He would soon head to New York, come back a few times, read "Bound for Glory" and identify with Woody Guthrie. Finally he would just fling himself out like a rank stranger, a lonesome pilgrim, a roving sign, to meet with Woody and absorb his essence. In New Jersey in the early wintry days of 1961, Dylan would see up close where life can lead if we are lucky or unlucky enough not to die young on the road. After putting forward his own "Last Thoughts

on Woody Guthrie" in 1963, four years before Woody's death, Dylan pushed himself out on his own long and unique road of discovery, invention and re-invention.

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.

Dylan has, in the songs he sings and those he writes, dreamed of Columbus's 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 luckier 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>)