

Commentary: How Jimmy LaFave gave us the gift of love

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The devotion of Jimmy LaFave to his own music — to the songs, thoughts and life of Woody Guthrie and to the creative talents of so many other truthful singers — was celebrated at the Songwriter Rendezvous at the Paramount Theater on Thursday.

Over three hours of music — all chosen by Jimmy — washed in love those of us at the Paramount and taking in live streaming. If you closed your eyes, you would have sworn the spirit of Woody Guthrie was present on stage.

One key person was missing: In recordings and in person, Jimmy always interpreted songs by Bob Dylan better than anyone on this planet. One Dylan song he returned to again and again — which brought us with him in our minds and souls — is Dylan's "[Love Minus Zero/No Limit](#)." At several of his live concerts in Austin, Jimmy, with good humor, asked me from the stage what this song is about.

Jimmy knew the answer deep down — but here is the answer Jimmy inspired in me: Dylan has many spectacular love songs. Lots of love-gone-wrong songs. Lots of joyous love-gone-right songs. In concert, Dylan has covered love songs by other artists famous and obscure. Dylan critics acknowledge — and Jimmy knew — that "Love Minus Zero/No Limits" is a powerful love song. But what is it about exactly?

The key is that Dylan in a 1965 concert introduced the song from the stage by title — a rarity for him — saying that it was a sort of fraction. It is. But what is the value of this fraction? The answer lies not in our heads but our hearts.

Dylan says his love speaks like silence. 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?

Dylan says his love is true, like ice and like fire. We who have lesser ways with words would say something like her love is rock solid. Paul Simon sings “she loves me like a rock.” But to have love be as cold as cold can be — and as hot as hot can be at the same time — is love transcendent.

Dylan's loved one also knows that all the conventional trappings of love — such as roses, declarations of true love, and valentines — are not where love truly is. Dylan subverts our expectations by having his love laugh not “at” the flowers but “like” them. We hear the wonderful, rose-petal softness when our true love laughs.

The other verses lay out what people have no inclination or take too little time to think and feel and accept as substitutes for reality, knowing and real love. Snippets out of books. Stolen quotations. Idle conversation. Bus station graffiti. Statues of matchsticks. Macbeth-like skullduggery. The expectations of the daughters of the rich and powerful that their love can be bought for the price of a false image of “a perfect life.”

Of course, Dylan doesn't lecture us and lay out a rational argument; he conjures up images. Dylan knows, as he sings in other songs, that “it's rough out there.” His closing image — with a nod to Edgar Allan Poe — is of winds and rain storming outside. His loved one is like a raven at his window out in the cold, callous and stupid world. The world has harmed her. She has a 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 his “Percy’s Song” as “oh the cruel rain/and the wind.”

What throws us for a real loop is what the denominator of the fraction means. Love minus zero is understandable: love without anything subtracted. Love whole and complete. But divided by no limit — by infinity?

The koan of this part of the title is that true love is indivisible and unsubtractable. It is a whole. It cannot be diminished —and it cannot really be increased. That is only an illusion.

Yet, what makes it a koan or conundrum is that 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, and the beautiful song sung — because love is in us.

I wish that when I had first heard this song and the dozens and dozens of times I have listened to it later, I had taken the time to feel it. This one song tells us some things that are so true that they almost defy conscious thought and reasoning. That is why they need to be sung. And that is why Jimmy sang and sang and sang it, with his own inimitable depth of feeling and his own Guthrie-like desire that our world be more full of love.