

## **COMMENTARY *Austin American-Statesman***

### **Palaima: Listen to the Songs We Sing**

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Bob Dylan has been awarded conspicuous public honors in recent years for his forty-plus years of absorbing all varieties of American music, exploring the nuances of these traditions, intertwining their essential truths with the instincts of his own soul, and then creating new or renewed songs that speak to the present state of the human condition. I am obviously a lifelong fan. I have friends who cannot stand to hear one nasal emission from Dylan's vocal chords. Tolerance for different tastes is what America is all about, and Dylan's voice is a true litmus test for tolerance.

When I heard Joe Lieberman in his vice-presidential acceptance speech hearken back to JFK's vision of a new frontier for American society and Rep. John Lewis of Georgia speak of Lieberman's participation in voting-rights drives in the once-segregated south, my head played Dylan's poignant 'Oxford Town': "He went down to Oxford Town/ Guns and clubs followed him down/ All because his face was brown/ Better get away from Oxford Town" (Š 1963).

That song made me hear again the dignified voice of noted journalist, author and doctor of divinity Wallace Terry as he recounted to honors students at UT Austin his own experiences driving solo through the south to cover the civil rights movement. He had to urinate into bottles in his car. Service stations refused to let a black man use their facilities, and peeing on the grassy roadside exposed him to arrest for public lewdness. Fortunately the times they have been a-changin'.

The associative force and staying power of Dylan's images and music reminded me also why song is used in all cultures to distill, instill and transmit fundamental values, to speak directly to major crises and to justify the need for drastic changes within society. We experience aspects of this power in our church hymns, in nursery songs, in folk, blues, gospel, country and rap music, in the 'Star-Spangled Banner'.

This power is understood and exploited by advertising firms. I can still hear on my mental cd-player the number of the Aluminum Siding Corporation that sponsored Cleveland Indians games in the sixties. It is GARfield 1-2323 (repeat). But don't bother calling. They went out of business long before the Tribe finally got back in the business of winning ball games.

The minister at my son's kindergarten closed the first-day assembly today by leading us parents, teachers and children in a stanza from a classic. We sang 'Dewey was the admiral at Manila Bay', wondered where he and we were heading, and then got the punch-line: 'Do we love each other? Yes we do.' It has snuggled in right beside the Aluminum Siding Corporation. It will always remind me of the love my wife and I felt for Emmett on the day he left day-care and became one of the precious souls we are talking about when we discuss how to improve performance in our schools K-16.

The power of song to influence our experiences and actions, and those of our children, explains why the contents of pop lyrics have been a concern to us from the days when Elvis Presley transmogrified Big Mama Thornton's 'Hound Dog' and Chuck Berry duck-walked through alternative 'black' or 'white' versions of 'Reelin' and Rockin', to the concerns of Tipper Gore and Bill Bennett with violent and explicitly sexual lyrics.

Professor Peter Schickele, aka P.D.Q. Bach, claims in his own inimitable phrasing that there is no such thing as bad music. In my mind there is no trivial music. Watching what people do with song tells you a lot about them. Most students are astonished when I clue them in to the plaintive studio version of Bruce Springsteen's 'Born in the USA'. They can then vicariously share my bewilderment at how a

song that hymns the tragic insensitivity of our society to the plight of Vietnam War veterans became a cheery theme song for a political convention in the 80's.

Driving the other day, I had Dylan's pathos-laden 'Delia' playing on tape. As he sang the refrain one more time, Emmett asked from the back seat, "Daddy, what does 'All the friends I ever had are gone' mean?" I think he feels some of what it means today, on his first day of kindergarten. Friends from your past are precious and you have to work hard to hold onto them. For the times they keep a-changin'.

Thomas G. Palaima is Dickson Centennial Classics at UT Austin and includes music among the 'myths of war and violence' that he teaches.