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Defending Dylan: Why I'm looking past the lingerie ad

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Bob Dylan has sold his true soul by appearing in a Victoria's Secret ad.

One version of this lament appeared recently in the Los Angeles Times and the American-Statesman. Leslie Bennetts, an editor for Vanity Fair magazine and a baby boomer mother of a teenage daughter, thinks Bob has sold out. Worse yet, Bennetts says her daughter, a Victoria's Secret shopper, has had her image of Bob Dylan irreparably marred.

But the image her daughter had was her mother's false, nostalgic one.

Bennetts' op-ed reminds us why, in 1965, Dylan said goodbye to the social-protest folk-music scene that was placing a straitjacket on his creative energies. The Dylan many now accuse of "selling out" has not existed for nearly 40 years. In his place stands a magnificent artist who has been free to mine nearly every vein in American music.

Way back in the spring of 1963, oral historian Studs Terkel interviewed the 20-year-old Dylan for 74 minutes on WFMT radio in Chicago. Dylan played seven short songs. Terkel told listeners that Dylan gave voice to young peoples' anxieties about the atomic bomb, repressive conformity, poverty and civil rights. Dylan, clearly uneasy, repeatedly denied he was a spokesman for anyone or any cause.

Still, the songs Dylan sang for Terkel had clear social significance. "Who Killed Davey Moore?" quotes a boxing writer, promoter and Moore's opponent talking about Moore's tragic death in a boxing match. They all claim: "It wasn't me made him fall./ You can't blame me at all." In bootleg concert recordings, crowds applaud when Dylan sings of Cuba as a place "where boxin' ain't allowed no more." Hardly a patriotic sentiment just after the Bay of Pigs fiasco.

"John Brown" tells the story of a young man sent off to war by his beaming mother. He comes back disfigured beyond recognition. He speaks of the terror he felt when he realized that his enemy's face "looked just like mine." He is bitter that his mother was "home actin' proud" while he was on the battle ground "tryin' to kill somebody or die tryin'."

This is Bob Dylan on his first four albums between 1962 and 1964. It is a Dylan who has only been seen in rare flashes on his next 40 albums from "Highway 61" onward.

By 1965, he had already undergone two metamorphoses that caused fans to complain he was no longer what they wanted him to be.

After his first album mainly of American folk standards, Dylan began recording his own songs. Dylan's song-writing was so good that folk devotees still accepted him. But in 1965, Dylan plugged in electrically and played in rock 'n' roll style. He also began writing songs that weren't designed to raise our consciousness about burning problems of the day.

Dylan has now explored and assimilated musical traditions as diverse as American regional folk, gospel, blues, country and western, reggae, rock 'n' roll, disco and jazz. He has even sung pop ballads like Dean Martin's "Return to Me" with one whole stanza in Italian.

In concert, he almost always plays one or two songs of what he calls "rural" music: early church standards, blues, or regional tunes that speak to the hopes, beliefs and hard times of common people.

In 1992 and '93, Dylan enriched all our spirits with masterful renderings of American and British folk and blues. He introduced many listeners to forgotten musicians such as the African American fiddle-blues group the Mississippi Sheiks. He revived the children's folk song "Froggie Went A-Courtin," which as a boy I heard sung by Burl Ives. He poured existential sorrow into the folk song "Delia," making it into a haunting song of lost love.

So now Victoria's Secret has released a CD of nine Dylanesque love songs. Its outlets in Highland Mall and elsewhere advertise their mainstream sexy lingerie and women's undergarments using beautiful models. Why? Because many men and women find this appealing. This is why Hollywood uses starlets in its films and why Leslie Bennetts' own Vanity Fair magazine for May 2004 runs ads for Yves St. Laurent's Opium perfume and Guess clothing featuring beautiful semi-nude models.

One 20-something student of mine told me she and her boyfriend found the Dylan ad weird, but they listened to the CD and found the music beautiful, sad and depressing. Now they know what a Dylan love song is like. And they have been reminded that love, as Terkel says of Dylan's beautiful "Boots of Spanish Leather," is not all "June, moon, spoon."

If I were a mother, that's something I would want my daughter to know, even if she learned it from an enigmatic old songster in a ladies' undergarment ad.

As many of us baby boomers once chanted, "Make love, not war."

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