

COMMENTARY

Palaima: The times they are a-changin' but Dylan's still protesting through music

Thomas G. Palaima, REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

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Just two years ago, Bob Dylan offended many old fans by appearing in a Victoria's Secret lingerie ad. Victoria's Secret outlets were selling a special compilation of his painfully honest love songs, spanning some 35 years of his experiences with life and love.

He stood accused of selling out.

A few voices were raised in his defense, including mine right here in the *American-Statesman*.

Well, Dylan is breaking the hearts of Americans again, mainly those born between 1925 and 1955, and he is doing so on a weekly basis.

If you love music, you will give him a chance to break yours. Let me explain.

Take a look around. In the 1930s through the 1960s, an empowered federal government, its protective laws, unions, effective consumer-advocacy groups, graduated taxes and the Supreme Court pulled us out of the Great Depression; enforced protections for workers and all citizens against the hiring, labor and sales practices of big corporations; and overrode states-rights-based racial discrimination against minorities. We won a major world war by uniting behind it, paying for it and engaging in universal symbolic citizen sacrifice: "Bye, Bye. Buy Bonds. Save Chicken Fat. And Join the WACS."

Those lessons are now forgotten. Those achievements are undone or under attack. We are waging a large-scale war by raising our debt, not our taxes.

Our own U.S. senator, John Cornyn, denigrates the Supreme Court, declaring that five people, also known as a majority of Supreme Court justices, should not determine what the people of this state can do about the American flag, or, by implication, any other such issue.

Life is rootless and impersonal. Citizens feel powerless. With hundreds of cable stations, we no longer share a common experience at the one communal hearth we used to have: television. Remember three national networks, Huntley and Brinkley and Uncle Walter Cronkite? People are entrusting the most important aspect of their lives to services such as selectivesearch-inc.com. It promises to "take the labor out of finding love" by applying to personal lives the vetting process methodology that is "so effective in corporate America."

And, now, Dylan breaks our hearts. How? By his weekly Theme Time Radio broadcasts on XM satellite radio, warm evocations of old-timey radio.

In each hour, Dylan covers a chosen theme: mothers, fathers, baseball, coffee, weddings, divorce, showing how the common musical traditions of the United States shaped our lives in song and lyric.

Dylan's succinct commentary makes the music shine. He is witty, gently humorous, erudite and always reverent about the music he is playing.

We hear the sounds of big band, country swing, rock-a-billy, blues, rhythm and blues, rock 'n' roll, Nashville, MoTown, Sun Records, Frank Sinatra, the Ink Spots, Bob Wills and Kitty Wells. Interspersed, he gives plainly spoken information about the artists, where they came from, where they went, who influenced them and what influence they had. He recites lyrics, painting pictures of our lives in sound.

Dylan doesn't peddle himself or anything else. No product placement here. Period commercials are spliced in to set the mood. A listener asks on Theme Time Coffee: "Why do you play so much old music? Do you have something against new music?"

Dylan replies, "I like new music. But there's more old music than new music."

Dylan retrieves many classics and brings to light many should-be-classics. On Theme Time Mothers, he plays Buck Owens' "I'll Go to Church with Mama," and tells us an old joke from Buck's TV show "Hee Haw." He spins Ernie K. Doe's 1961 chart-topper "Mother-in-Law," and LL Cool J's "Mama Said Knock You Out," explaining its ultimate origins in the African American insult-song contests known as the "dozens."

Theme Time Radio is hip, but not Tarantino's jaded hip, or William Shatner's self-mocking hip. Dylan respects the music we and he loved. He respects the artists who created it, even lived it.

Another listener writes that she likes to listen to baseball broadcasts at night, but that bothers her boyfriend.

Dylan's solution: "Put the radio under your pillow and rest your ear on the pillow. That's what it's made for."

Remember listening to ballgames like that, or music programs from distant cities at night?

These shows are so humane, so out of time, they will break your heart.

Dylan is still protesting. He is protesting our fast-paced, dehumanized present by calling us to gather round the hearth of old-time radio and remember life as it used to be and could be again, if we stop and really listen to it, and to each other.

Palaima is Dickson Centennial Professor of Classics at the University of Texas at Austin. He is 54 years old.