

—“I find the religiosity and philosophy in the music. ... I don’t adhere to rabbis, preachers, evangelists, all of that. I’ve learned more from the songs than I’ve learned from any of this kind of entity. The songs are my lexicon. I believe in the songs” (BD Newsweek, Oct 6, 1997).

— “If you take whatever there is to the song away—the beat, the melody—I could still recite it.” BD 1965

—“It’s the sound and the words. Words don’t interfere with it. They punctuate it.” BD 1977

The thesis of this presentation is that **(1)** more than any other American popular artist during the last half century, Bob Dylan has the qualities of an oral poet; and **(2)** Dylan’s songs serve the same functions of social enculturation and witness to key realities of life that were the hallmark of ancient Greek oral poetry like Homer’s *Iliad* and Hesiod’s *Works and Days*.

Hesiod’s work falls into the parainetic (advice) tradition of ‘oral poetics’—and Homer’s contains strains of it, too. Hesiod’s *Works and Days* has been compared to the work of Old Testament prophets. Dylan, although often accused of having given up on socially oriented ‘protest music’ by 1965, i.e., very early in his career, falls into this category. For a *prophetes* to be timeless or universal, his words have to transcend specific historical events. As Christopher Ricks has pointed out, Dylan’s best ‘protest’ songs, e.g., “Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” and even “Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” achieve this.

The *prophetes* is an ‘agent of speaking forth’ poetic advice that causes listeners to think about their lives and how they are being lived. There is a strong concern for life’s realities in Dylan’s lyrics right up to the latest official verses in the songs from his *Love and Theft* album. Social criticism permeates such songs as “Serve Somebody,” “Foot of Pride,” “Blind Willie McTell,” “Clean Cut Kid,” “I and I,” “Senor,” “Ring Them Bells,” “TV Talking Song,” “Not Dark Yet,” and, as we shall see and hear here today, “High Water (for Charley Patton).” Many other songs could be added to this list.

Even more than this, however, Dylan reveals his oral poetic nature in his reverence for folk, blues, bluegrass, gospel, spirituals, rock and roll, Irish and Scottish ballads, country and western and other forms of popular music. He is a devotee of the real music of the people, the music that expresses their real concerns. In his staggering number of live concerts on his Never Ending Tour, he has played at least as many traditional folk, blues and popular songs as the hundreds he himself has written (over 460 at last official count), often infusing them with his own dramatic feelings of honesty and truth and what is real. Dylan’s own musical compositions are deeply indebted to and saturated with elements of traditional song. Dylan, like any good songster (compare Texas’s own Mance Lipscomb) respects the genuine need we have to hear simple truths sung, our joys and sorrows expressed, and our troubles, frustrations and tragedies shared with others.

The lyrics and music of Bob Dylan and his sources within different traditions speak for themselves.

Folk songs are the way I explored the universe. They were pictures and the pictures were worth more than anything I could say. I knew the inner substance of the thing. I could connect the pieces....

Most of the other performers tried to put themselves across, rather than the song, but...with me, it was putting the song across.

B. Dylan, *Chronicles. Volume One* (New York 2004) 18

Tom and I are gonna do a song for you right now. We used to hear these songs all the time when we were growing up. You can't hear them anymore. Very seldom you hear real songs anymore. Well, we were lucky to grow up, when you could hear them all the time. All you had to do was switch on the radio and you could hear them. BD February 24, 1986 during a concert tour with Tom Petty and introducing a pop song “I Forgot More Than You’ll Ever Know” wherein the narrator tells the new lover of his old girl friend what he is in for. <http://www.bjorner.com/DSN07660%20-%201986%20Down%20Under%20Tour.htm#DSN07810>

“I Was Young When I Left Home” *No Direction Home: The Soundtrack* (The Bootleg Series Vol. 7)

This Dylan song is based on the old folk song “900 Miles”. The pathos in his voice belies the fact that he was a mere 20 years old when this was composed and recorded (December 12, 1961). The realization of the song’s *nostalgia*, in the literal Greek meaning of an intense and painful (*algos* cf. English *analgesic*) longing for returning home (*nostos*), comes from Dylan’s ability to, as he says, ‘put across the song’. It is a quality shared by few popular singers in the last sixty years. Frank Sinatra was another singer who had this quality, despite having no gift for writing songs. It is no accident that Sinatra invited Dylan to sing at his 80th birthday concert—he sang his own “Restless Farewell”.

Dylan is also able to place himself inside the narrator and capture for us his longing and his sense of loss. Dylan has what I would call a profound sense of emotional visualization and expression. The narrator here finds himself with mother dead, baby sister gone down a ruinous path in life, daddy in great need, but himself impoverished and embarrassed by his own circumstances and lack of resources to do anything to help. Dylan evokes the narrator’s own flashes of childhood memories—natural when he hears the news from home—of how his mother used to care for him when he was a boy playing along the railroad tracks. This heightens the pathos, as does his declaration of wanting a shelter from the wind, a safe haven, a home, none of which he has. His aching loss is worsened by the fact that he never wrote home since he left. Again listen and feel: Dylan is 20 years old and already has an uncanny imaginative empathy, derived from being steeped in popular music, for people in life’s direst circumstances.

“900 Miles” TRADITIONAL FOLK SONG (royalty free)

<http://www.traditionalmusic.co.uk/folk-songs-with-chords/900%20Miles.htm>

I'm a walking down the track,
I've got tears in my eyes,
I'm tryin' to read a letter from my home;
If that train runs me right,
I'll be home Saturday night,
Cause I'm nine hundred miles from my home.
And I hate to hear that lonesome whistle blow,
That long lonesome train whistlin' down.

Well this train I ride on,
Is a hundred coaches long,
You can hear her whistle blow a hundred miles;
And if this train runs me right,
I'll see my woman Saturday night,
'Cause I'm nine hundred miles from my home.
And I hate to hear that lonesome whistle blow,
That long lonesome train whistling down.

I will pawn you my wagon,
I will pawn you my team,
I will pawn you my watch and my chain;
And if tins train runs me right,
I'll be home Saturday night,
'Cause I'm nine hundred miles from my home.
And I hate to hear that lonesome whistle blow,
That long lonesome train whistling down.

1. "I Was Young When I Left Home" Dylan LYRICS un-copyrighted 12/12/1961

I sorta made it up on a train. Huh, oh I'm here. This must be good for somebody, this sad song. I know it's good for somebody. If it ain't for me, it's good for somebody. I just talked about it, huh huh.

I was young when I left home
and I been a-rambling 'round.
And I never wrote a letter to my home.
To my home, lord to my home.
And I never wrote a letter to my home.

It was just the other day,
I was bringing home my pay
when I met an old friend I used to know.
Said your mother's dead and gone,
baby sister's all gone wrong
and your daddy needs you home right away.

Not a shirt on my back,
not a penny on my name.
But I can't go home thisaway.
Thisaway, lord lord lord.
And I can't go home thisaway.

If you miss the train I'm on,
count the days I'm gone.
You will hear that whistle blow a hundred miles.
Hundred miles, honey baby, lord lord lord,
and you'll hear that whistle blow a hundred miles.

I'm playing on a track,
ma would come and whoop me back
on them trussels down by old Jim McKay's.
When I pay the debt I owe to the commissary store,
I will pawn my watch and chain and go home.
Go home, lord lord lord.
I will pawn my watch and chain and go home.

Used to tell ma sometimes
when I see them riding blind,
gonna make me a home out in the wind.
In the wind, lord in the wind.
Make me a home out in the wind.

I don't like it in the wind,
Gonna go back home again,
but I can't go home thisaway.
Thisaway, lord lord lord,
and I can't go home thisaway.

I was young when I left home
and I been all rambling 'round.
And I never wrote a letter to my home.
To my home lord lord lord.
And I never wrote a letter to my home.

“Bob Dylan’s Dream” Copyright © 1963; renewed 1991 Special Rider Music

Gifted oral poets are immersed in song traditions and they borrow and adapt forms, melodies, lines and themes, often in jazz-improvisational ways. Great blues artists do the same. The early illiterate blues artists would vary their standard renditions to suit the occasion. The text is not fixed and, of course, itinerant ‘songsters’ were singing to audiences who themselves often did not read and write, but who knew certain story lines.

“Bob Dylan’s Dream” was written and performed here when Dylan was not yet 22 years old. It is written to a tune from a traditional English folk ballad “Lord Franklin” about the dream dreamt by Lady Franklin for her husband who had sailed away in 1845 to try to find the northern ship’s passage through Canada’s icy waters. Dylan learned this song from Martin Carthy, who can be viewed as a British Bob Dylan who throughout his career stayed attached to folk tradition. Both men are musical giants.

Dylan here not only uses the melody, but also adapts the themes. His narrator has also had a dream—while traveling. Dylan’s narrator also mourns personal loss, not of a husband and his gallant crew, but of old and absent friends who were comrades and who, like Franklin and his sailors, had an unrealistic and, in the event, ignorant enthusiasm about what their life’s adventures would bring them. Dylan’s narrator, too, sings from the perspective of years gone by. And he, too, offers a reward of ten thousand coins if his lost friends could be restored to him. Notice in Carthy’s version the easy shift from the perspective of Lady Franklin to the perspective of “we poor sailors” in stitching the song together. Such shifts do not trouble the listeners of folk, blues, gospel.

We first listen Martin Carthy singing “Lord Franklin” and then listen to Dylan’s song. Once again, Dylan can capture the feeling of a narrator well along in years. But I think he was already tapping into a vagabond’s feelings. It took mighty courage on his part to hitchhike from Minnesota to New York City with no prospects and with just a bit more than “not a shirt on my back, not a penny on my name.”

Lord Franklin [Trad. arr. Martin Carthy] Sung by Martin Carthy in 1966 on his [Second Album](#). This was re-issued on the Martin Carthy anthologies [A Collection](#) and [The Carthy Chronicles](#).

Martin Carthy said in the [Second Album](#) sleeve notes:

Sir John Franklin set out with two ships, the “Erebus” and the “Terror”, on his second attempt to discover the North West Passage and was never heard of again. It was almost twelve years before the story of what had actually happened to the expedition was finally pieced together. After sailing round the island in the far north of Canada, the ships, predictably, became trapped in the ice; what was completely unexpected, however, was that the lime juice stored in barrels became useless and half the crews of both ships died of scurvy. Some of the others decided to strike across country for a mission station, but one by one they died on the journey. How they managed to die in country that was full of game where Eskimos had lived for generations is a mystery. The real tragedy was Franklin’s blunder in not allowing for such a contingency: he had taken along beautiful tea-services, flags and dress uniforms for the celebrations when their mission was accomplished, instead of extra food supplies. Several rescue operations were mounted, one by Lady Franklin herself from the proceeds of public fund she started for that purpose, after the Admiralty had washed its hands of the whole affair, having itself failed in a rather desultory rescue attempt. The truth was actually discovered by an expedition in which the United States Navy took part.

See also Louis Killen’s version of *Lord Franklin* and its Australian variant *The Loss of Bob Mahoney* by Danny Spooner on the anthology [Song Links](#) and Éilís Kennedy’s version of *Lord Franklin* on her album [Time to Sail](#).

2. "Lord Franklin" FROM <http://www.ric.edu/rpotter/SJFranklin.html>

Lyrics

Martin Carthy, Second Album

It was homeward bound one night on the deep
Swinging in my hammock I fell asleep
I dreamed a dream and I thought it true
Concerning Franklin and his gallant crew

With a hundred seamen he sailed away
To the frozen ocean in the month of May
To seek that passage around the pole
Where we poor sailors do sometimes go

Through cruel hardships these men did go
His ship on mountains of ice was drove
Where the Eskimo in his skin canoe
Was the only one who ever came through

In Baffin Bay where the whale fish blow
The fate of Franklin no man may know
The fate of Franklin no tongue can tell
Lord Franklin along with his sailors do dwell

And now my burden it gives me pain
For my long lost Franklin I'd cross the main
Ten thousand pounds would I freely give
To know on earth that my Franklin do live

Sam Henry, Songs of the People
(from Digital Tradition)

We were homeward bound all in the deep
Alone in my hammock I fell asleep
And I dreamt a dream that I thought was true
Concerning Franklin and his bold crew

N.B. note the shift to 'we sailors' in Carthy's version in which Lady Franklin is narrator unlike the 'we' version in this column in which the sailor narrator reports the lament of Lady Franklin

As I was musing on yon foreign shore
I heard a lady and she did deplore
She wept aloud and to me did say,
Oh, my loving husband, he stops long away.

It is seven long years since three ships of fame
Caused my dear husband to cross the main
And a hundred seamen of courage stout
A northwest passage for to find out

They sail-ed east and they sail-ed west
To find their passage they knew not best
Ten thousand pounds would I freely give
If I only knew if my husband lived

There is Captain Parry of high renown
There is Captain Hoggs of Seamore town
There is Captain Ross and many more
I'm afraid they are lost on some foreign shore

In Baffin's Bay where the whale fish blows
The fate of Franklin no one knows
I am afraid he is lost on yon foreign shore
Where he left his home to return no more.

Acknowledgements: Transcribed by Garry Gillard

3. "Bob Dylan's Dream" Copyright © 1963; renewed 1991 Special Rider Music 02/08/1963

While riding on a train goin' west,
I fell asleep for to take my rest.
I dreamed a dream that made me sad,
Concerning myself and the first few friends I had.

With half-damp eyes I stared to the room
Where my friends and I spent many an afternoon,
Where we together weathered many a storm,
Laughin' and singin' till the early hours of the morn.

By the old wooden stove where our hats was hung,
Our words were told, our songs were sung,
Where we longed for nothin' and were quite satisfied
Talkin' and a-jokin' about the world outside.

With haunted hearts through the heat and cold,
We never thought we could ever get old.
We thought we could sit forever in fun
But our chances really was a million to one.

As easy it was to tell black from white,
It was all that easy to tell wrong from right.
And our choices were few and the thought never hit
That the one road we traveled would ever shatter and split.

How many a year has passed and gone,
And many a gamble has been lost and won,
And many a road taken by many a friend,
And each one I've never seen again.

I wish, I wish, I wish in vain,
That we could sit simply in that room again.
Ten thousand dollars at the drop of a hat,
I'd give it all gladly if our lives could be like that.

Bob Dylan over time has paid serious and generous homage to the influence of other musicians on his own music: Hank Williams, the Stanley Brothers, the Clancey Brothers, Rick von Schmidt, Charlie Patton, Woody Guthrie, Harry Belafonte, Elizabeth Cotten, Stephen Foster, Robert Johnson, Johnny Cash, the Mississippi Sheikhs, Gordon Lightfoot and many others. He has played many of their songs in concert. He has drawn inspiration throughout his career from blues and folk artists, from what he calls 'rural music'. Three of these great artists have received direct recognition in Dylan songs dedicated to (and derived from) them; "Song to Woody" Copyright © 1962 renewed 1990 MCA; "High Water (for Charley Patton)" Copyright © 2001 Special Rider Music, which we will hear later; and "Blind Willie McTell" Copyright © 1983 Special Rider Music.

Blind Willie McTell (1901?-1959) was a Georgia blues songster whose most famous recordings date 1927-40. His "Statesboro Blues" was a commercial hit for the Allman Brothers. Dylan used the tune to another blues classic "St. James Infirmary" to write one of his most haunting evocations of atmosphere, the song named eponymously "Blind Willie McTell." The song itself reveals Dylan's ability to paint scenes in his songs that we can hear, see and feel. See his serious quote about folk songs being pictures to him. In "Blind Willie McTell," Dylan's images of slavery ships, sweet magnolias, cracking whips, plantations, revival tents, bootlegged whiskey, squires, hoot owls, and charcoal gypsy maidens combine to 'get across' his opening pronouncement:

Seen the arrow on the doorpost / Saying, "This land is condemned
All the way from New Orleans / To Jerusalem."
I traveled through East Texas / Where many martyrs fell
And I know no one can sing the blues / Like Blind Willie McTell.

In 1991 and 1992 when Dylan was at his own life turning point (fifty years old) he went into the studio and immersed himself in performing and recording two complete cd's (*Good As I Been to You* and *World Gone Wrong*) entirely of blues and folk standards drawn from diverse sources: Stephen Foster, songs found in Francis James Child's *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, songs from the Seeger family's collections of regional folk tunes, blues artists, a version of "Stagger Lee," a cattle-drover song, even the children's classic made popular by Burl Ives, "Frog Went A-Courtin'." He drew from these fountains and they revived him. These two cd's literally sustained me during a long absence from my own home far away from the woman I love. And I sang songs from them to our dear son as lullabies when he was a toddler.

To my mind the greatest demonstration of Dylan's oral poetic genius on these two cd's is seen in what he creates out of the song cycle that surrounds the figure of "Delia." As with the now over-a-century-old "Stagger Lee" tradition, the "Delia" tradition goes back to a real murder:

Delia Green, age 14, was shot and killed by Moses "Coony" Houston, age 16, in the Yamacraw area of Savannah ("poor, black and violent") at ca. 11:30 PM December 24, 1900.

This spawned a century of "Delia" and related songs by performers such as Reese Du Pree (1924), Leadbelly, the Reverend Gary Davis, Blind Willie McTell, Blind Blake, and modern rock and folk and country singers like Roger McGuinn, Martin Simpson, Dave Ray and Spider John Koerner, and Johnny Cash. The murderer is known variously as Curtis, Curly, Kenny, and Tony. Departing from the historical facts, Delia herself is often depicted as a kind of rounder, too, a gambling woman to be treated with dismissive contempt or even murdered with—in the narrator's mind—every good reason.

We see in Dylan's version how he blends different song elements, shifts narrative perspective, and turns a song theme that in most other versions is hard, dismissive or graphically matter of fact about the death of Delia into one of longing and aching loss. Here we listen to Blind Willie McTell's and Bob Dylan's versions.

4. Blind Willie McTell, "Little Delia" Complete Library of Congress Recordings (1940) (Document BDCD-6001) & Legendary Library of Congress Session (Elektra 301), copyright notice.¹ Corrected by TGP to be accurate for the recorded version used here.

Delia, Delia, how can it be? / You say you love old **rounders**, and you don't love me
Now she's one more rounder gone

Delia, Delia sitting all alone
Some of these rounders gonna pay my way back home
Cause she's one more rounder gone.

Sitting on the housetop, high as I can see / Say you love those rounders, and don't love me
But she's one more rounder gone.

Delia's poor mother took a little trip out West
When she returned, little Delia was lyin' in rest
But she's one more rounder gone.

Delia's momma weeps, Delia's father moans
They wouldna hated it so bad if that girl had died at home
But see all I got is gone.

Delia was a gambler, running all around / She was one girl never let the deal go down
But she's one more rounder gone

Rubber tired buggy, silver-seated hack, / took Delia to the cemetery, but failed to bring her back
But she's one more rounder gone.

Delia was a gambler, running all around / She was one girl never let the deal go down
But she's one more rounder gone

Delia lookin' high, Kenny lookin' low, / Shot poor Delia down with that hateful .44.
But she's one more rounder gone.

Delia, Delia, take no one's advice / Last words I heard her say was, "Jesus Christ!"
But she's one more rounder gone.

Kenny's in the barroom, drinking from a silver cup
Delia's in the graveyard, she may not never wake up
But she's one more rounder gone.

Judge: Judge said to Kenny, "What was that stuff about?"
"All account of them gamblers tryin' to put me out."
But she's one more rounder gone

Judge said to Kenny, "I'm gonna tell you a natural fact.
Son, you going to stay <in jail> till old Delia come back"
But she's one more rounder gone.

Other versions are, as we have mentioned, cynical, matter-of-fact, or even murderous, like Johnny Cash's:

"Delia's Gone" Johnny Cash *Murder* **Label:** Sony **Catalog Number:** 65543

Delia, oh, Delia Delia all my life
If I hadn't have shot poor Delia
I'd have had her for my wife
Delia's gone, one more round Delia's gone

I went up to Memphis
And I met Delia there Found her in her parlor
And I tied to her chair
Delia's gone, one more round Delia's gone

She was low down and trifling
And she was cold and mean
Kind of evil make me want to Grab my sub machine
Delia's gone, one more round Delia's gone

First time I shot her I shot her in the side
Hard to watch her suffer
But with the second shot she died
Delia's gone, one more round Delia's gone

But jailer, oh, jailer Jailer,
I can't sleep 'Cause all around my bedside
I hear the patter of Delia's feet
Delia's gone, one more round Delia's gone

So if your woman's devilish
You can let her run
Or you can bring her down and do her
Like Delia got done
Delia's gone, one more round Delia's gone

In the uptempo version of Spider John Koerner and Dave Ray (found on *A Nod to Bob Red House* Recordings RHR CD 154), Tony kills Delia because she "cursed him a record curse." When the judge tells Tony he's got ninety-nine <years in jail> for the murder, he replies, "Ninety-nine years in a jailhouse? / Judge, that ain't no time. / I gotta brother in New Orleans / doin' nine hundred ninety-nine." And, if that doesn't show you the hard ways of the world, at the close the narrator declares about Delia, "Some gave her a nickel. / Some gave her a dime. / I didn't give her nuthin'. / She weren't no gal of mine."

Dylan turns this stuff into a ballad of loss and sorrow, in melody, the breaking plaintive voice, the repeated lyrical refrain about lost friends, and finally the inversion in the last two stanzas, where he talks first about Delia's failure to love him, and then finally about her failure to have time for him at all. Contrast the effects on tone and mood of the 'silver cup' and 'barroom' of Kenny in McTell's version with the 'old tin cup' and 'jailhouse' of Curtis in Dylan's version.

Bob Dylan: "DELIA is one sad tale—two or more versions mixed into one. The song has no middle range, comes whipping around the corner, seems to be about counterfeit loyalty."²

5. Bob Dylan "Delia" Copyright © 1993 Special Rider Music adjusted by TGP for how it is sung

Delia was a gambling girl, gambled all around,
Delia was a gambling girl, she laid her money down.
All the friends I ever had are gone.

Delia's dear mother took a trip out West,
When she returned, little Delia gone to rest.
All the friends I ever had are gone.

Delia's daddy weeped, Delia's momma moaned,
Wouldn'a been so bad if the poor girl died at home.
All the friends I ever had are gone.

Curtis' looking high, Curtis' looking low,
He shot poor Delia down with a cruel forty-four. 'cruel' vs. 'hateful' (McTell) 'smoking' 'cold blue steel' (BD *albi*)
All the friends I ever had are gone.

High up on the housetops, high as I can see,
Looking for them rounders, looking out for me.
All the friends I ever had are gone.

Men in Atlanta, tryin' to pass for white,
Delia's in the graveyard, boys, six feet out of sight.
All the friends I ever had are gone.

Judge says to Curtis, "What's this noise about?"
"All about them rounders, Judge, tryin' to cut me out."
All the friends I ever had are gone.

Curtis said to the judge, "What might be my fine?"
Judge says, "Poor boy, you got ninety-nine."
All the friends I ever had are gone.

Curtis' in the jail house, drinking from an old tin cup,
Delia's in the graveyard, she must never, never get up.
All the friends I ever had are gone.

Delia, oh Delia, how can it be?
You loved all them rounders, never did love me.
All the friends I ever had are gone.

Delia, oh Delia, how can it be?
You wanted all them rounders, never had time for me.
All the friends I ever had are gone.

Next is a spectacular case of tribute and transformation. Arguably the two greatest fonts of recorded blues inspiration are Charley Patton (May 1, 1891-April 28, 1934) and Robert Johnson. Patton was the archetypal traveling blues poet-singer, using his talents to “keep on keepin’ on” on his own Never Ending Tour from Georgia to Texas, Illinois to his native Mississippi. His “Down the Dirt Road Blues” speaks directly to his desire to escape his oppressive origins through his powers as a songster and gives a glimpse of the bleakness of his conditions and of his spirit. His delivery is raw and powerful, in contrast to sweet-voiced blues singers like Robert Johnson or Skip James.

I'm going away to a world unknown.
 I'm going away to a world unknown.
 I'm worried now, but I won't be worried long...

Every day seem like murder here.
 Every day seem like murder here.
 I'm gonna leave tomorrow.
 I know you don't bit more care.

Patton’s “Shake It and Break It” is a standard blues man’s tribute to his own sexual prowess, the ‘jelly roll’ being his erect cock:

You can shake it, you can break it, you can hang it on the wall
 Throw it out the window, catch it 'fore it roll
 You can shake it, you can break it, you can hang it on the wall
 ...it out the window, catch it 'fore it falls
 My jelly, my roll, sweet mama, don't let it fall.

Dylan alludes to “Shake It and Break It” in his tribute to Patton.

Patton’s “High Water Everywhere” is his account of the great Mississippi flood of 1927. It is a minor epic that had to be recorded in two parts because of the limitations of 78 rpm records. Note Patton’s technique of universalizing references to places to carry the song forward. We are going to listen to Part 1.

6. Charlie Patton “High Water Everywhere (Part 1)” from Charley Patton: Founder Of The Delta Blues (Yazoo L-1020), copyright notice³

Well, backwater done rose all around Sumner now,
 drove me down the line
 Backwater done rose at Sumner,
 drove poor Charley down the line
 Lord, I'll tell the world the water,
 done crept through this town

Lord, the whole round country,
 Lord, river has overflowed
 Lord, the whole round country,
 man, is overflowed
 You know I can't stay here,
 I'll go where it's high, boy
 I would go to the hilly country,
 but, they got me barred

Now, look-a here now at Leland,
river was risin' high
Look-a here boys around Leland tell me,
river was raisin' high
Boy, it's risin' over there, yeah
I'm gonna move to Greenville,
fore I leave, goodbye

Look-a here the water now, Lordy,
Leveel broke, rose most everywhere
The water at Greenville and Leland,
Lord, it done rose everywhere
Boy, you can't never stay here
I would go down to Rosedale,
but, they tell me there's water there

Now, the water now, mama,
done took Charley's town
Well, they tell me the water,
done took Charley's town
Boy, I'm goin' to Vicksburg
Well, I'm goin' to Vicksburg,
for that high of mine **Vicksburg is a high locality that could provide refuge; cf. Dylan's version**

I am goin' up that water,
where lands don't never flow
Well, I'm goin' over the hill where,
water, oh don't ever flow
Boy, hit Sharkey County and everything was down in Stovall
But, that whole county was leavin',
over that Tallahatchie shore
Boy, went to Tallahatchie and got it over there

Lord, the water done rushed all over,
down old Jackson road
Lord, the water done raised,
over the Jackson road
Boy, it starched my clothes
I'm goin' back to the hilly country,
won't be worried no more.

If “Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” is Dylan’s great early 60’s prophetic warning about ruination to come, “High Water (for Charlie Patton)” is his late-career early new-millennium “Hard Rain Has Fallen—And Just Look.” The flood he describes is vividly metaphorical. It overwhelms doomed people, and there is no help as the fabric of society breaks down like something out of Thucydides’ or Defoe’s visions of plagues.

In the opening stanza, blues artist Big Joe Turner makes it to Kansas City (cf. “Goin’ to Kansas City”). He there surveys his surroundings and ‘from the dark room of his mind’—a mind, just like Patton’s, made grim and pessimistic by the effects on African-Americans of universal racial prejudice—sees nothing worthwhile standing. In the second stanza the mad and violent West Indian Creole woman Bertha Mason (from Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*) ‘shakes it and breaks it’, and declares that our choices are dictated to us by those in power. In the fourth stanza, everyone is drowning, so no one can offer rescue.

In stanza five, George Lewes (here spelled Lewis), British philosopher, lover of Marian Evans (George Eliot) and correspondent of Charles Darwin, pronounces on the limitations of the human mind. And the local high sheriff is ordered by the judge in northeast Mississippi to put out a dead or alive warrant on the originator of the theory of evolution. There is no salvation in intellect or the evolution of the species. Brutes triumph.

In the second-last stanza, Dylan quotes the old English folk song “Cuckoo She’s a Pretty Bird,” only to subvert the normal expectation of the bird as a bringer of glad tidings that “telleth no lies,” with the menacing vision of a fire-and-brimstone preacher who uses the word of God to be “putting out your eyes.”

The last stanza quotes Elmore James’ classic “Dust My Broom.” References to Vicksburg, Highway 5 and Clarksdale nod toward Charlie Patton’s place names as unifiers and universalizers. The tempo and thrust of the whole song are whip-cracking and wickedly apocalyptic. Vicksburg, the high-ground refuge in Patton’s original, is here inundated. Dylan’s vocal renderings are truly Pattonesque.

7. Bob Dylan “High Water (for Charlie Patton)” Copyright © 2001 Special Rider Music 10/30/2002

High water risin' - risin' night and day
 All the gold and silver are being stolen away
 Big Joe Turner lookin' East and West
 From the dark room of his mind
 He made it to Kansas City
 Twelfth Street and Vine
 Nothing standing there
 High water everywhere

High water risin', the shacks are slidin' down
 Folks losin' their possessions - folks are leaving town
 Bertha Mason shook it - broke it
 Then she hung it on a wall
 Says, "You're dancin' with whom they tell you to
 Or you don't dance at all."
 It's tough out there
 High water everywhere

I got a cravin' love for blazing speed
Got a hopped up Mustang Ford
Jump into the wagon, love, throw your panties overboard
I can write you poems, make a strong man lose his mind
I'm no pig without a wig
I hope you treat me kind
Things are breakin' up out there
High water everywhere

High water risin', six inches 'bove my head
Coffins droppin' in the street
Like balloons made out of lead
Water pourin' into Vicksburg, don't know what I'm going to do
"Don't reach out for me," she said
"Can't you see I'm drownin' too?"
It's rough out there
High water everywhere

Well, George Lewis told the Englishman, the Italian and the Jew
"You can't open your mind, boys
To every conceivable point of view."
They got Charles Darwin trapped out there on Highway Five
Judge says to the High Sheriff,
"I want him dead or alive
Either one, I don't care."
High Water everywhere

The Cuckoo is a pretty bird, she warbles as she flies
I'm preachin' the Word of God
I'm puttin' out your eyes
I asked Fat Nancy for something to eat, she said, "Take it off the shelf -
As great as you are a man,
You'll never be greater than yourself."
I told her I didn't really care
High water everywhere

I'm getting' up in the morning - I believe I'll dust my broom
Keeping away from the women
I'm givin' 'em lots of room
Thunder rolling over Clarksdale, everything is looking blue
I just can't be happy, love
Unless you're happy too
It's bad out there
High water everywhere

The sung oral word lives in memory, where it is hardly ever fixed. But it can be magically retrieved. Oral versification is spontaneous re-creation within set structures and parameters.

The great Greek oral poets (Homer and Hesiod) requested the help of the Muse or the goddess Memory herself (Mnemosyne) to bring words (*epea*) back from wherever they had gone. But who could tell, and who cared, without the printed texts, whether the words were what they had been before.

Bob Dylan, our modern English-language Homer, endorsed this fixed printed text for a stanza from his acknowledged 'epic' masterpiece "Tangled Up in Blue" (Copyright © 1974 Ram's Horn Music):

I had a job in the great north woods
 Working as a cook for a spell
 But I never did like it all that much
 And one day the ax just fell.
 So I drifted down to New Orleans
 Where I happened to be employed
 Workin' for a while on a fishin' boat
 Right outside of Delacroix.
 But all the while I was alone
 The past was close behind,
 I seen a lot of women
 But she never escaped my mind,
 and I just grew
 Tangled up in blue.

But a decade later he sang the same stanza this way on a June night in Göteborg, Sweden (06/09/1974):

He had a job and a pretty face
 And everything seemed to fit
 One day he could just feel the waste
 He put everything down and split
 Then he drifted down to New Orleans
 Where they treated him like a boy
 He almost went mad in Baton Rouge
 He nearly drowned in Delacroix
 All the while he was alone
 The past was close behind
 He had one too many lovers
 And they were all so refined
 All except you
 You were tangled up in blue.

Only four out of eighteen lines are appreciably the same. The 'I' narrator is replaced by 'he'. But the 'she' is replaced by direct address 'you'. The repeated place names New Orleans and Delacroix and the opening words '*I/he had a job*' are part of the structural frame as are the lines that lead into the close of the stanza: '*All the while I/he was alone // The past was close behind*'. Themes and mood are similar throughout. Almost all stanzas of the song show the same remarkable degree of variation from the canonical text. In other years, on other nights, still other words are sung. Dylan has varied other longer songs in this way over the years, e.g., "Serve Somebody," "Simple Twist of Fate," "Shelter from the Storm," "Clean-Cut Kid," even the recent "Tryin' to Get to Heaven."

We close with two last examples of Dylan's fondness in concert for playing songs that mean something real. The Stanley Brothers, made more widely known by Ralph Stanley's singing on the soundtrack for the Cohn brothers' film "Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?", cut wonderful spiritual-flavored bluegrass music for Syd Nathan's King records in the 1960's—the same label that then recorded James Brown!!!! Here we hear the Stanley Brothers' "Rank Strangers" and Dylan's version. Again notice the theme of lost home and lost loved ones that has drawn Dylan to this material.

RANK STRANGERS

<http://www.cowboylrics.com/tabs/stanley-brothers/rank-strangers-1846.html>

Recorded by The Stanley Brothers and the Clinch Mountain Boys
Written by Alfred E. Brumley, Sr.

INTRO: Play last two lines of chorus.

CAPO: 4th Fret/KEY: F#/PLAY: D

I wandered a-[D] gain - to my [A7] home in the [D] mountains
Where in youths' early dawn - I was [E] happy and [A7] free [E] [A7]
I looked for my [D] friends - but [A7] I never could [D] find them
I found they were all - rank [A7] strangers to [D] me. [G] [D]

CHORUS

Ever'body I met (ECHO: ever'body I met)
Seemed to [G] be a rank [D] stranger (seemed to be a rank stranger)
No mother or dad (no mother or dad) ...
Not a [E] friend could I [A7] see (not a [E] friend could I [A7] see)
They knew not my [D] name (they knew not my name)
And I [A7] knew not their [D] faces (and I knew not their faces)
I found they were all (I found they were all)
Rank [A7] strangers to [D] me (rank [G] strangers to [D] me).

"They've all moved away" - said the voice of a stranger
"To a beautiful home - by the bright crystal sea"
Some beautiful day - I'll meet 'em in heaven
Where no one will be - a stranger to me.

CHORUS

Source: THE BLUEGRASS HALL OF FAME, 1987 HIGHLAND MUSIC HT-105

Finally, after it was announced publicly in August 2002 that the late singer songwriter Warren Zevon, whose music has been called ‘iconoclastic with a dark, mordant absurdist wit,’ was dying of cancer, Dylan played in concerts in October 2002 two Zevon classics “Mutineer” and “Accidentally Like a Martyr.” “Mutineer” captures what is true of much of the real music that Dylan likes, writes and plays. That music focuses on what is amiss with the world and witnesses the pain and suffering of human lives. Through this witness, it implicitly or explicitly ‘mutinies’ against it. See the final quotation on the last page of this paper, wherein Dylan, in his early twenties, already understands what the ‘blues’ does for its singers and its audiences.

“Mutineer” By Warren Zevon c. 1995 Zevon Music BMI adjusted by TGP to reflect as sung by Dylan

Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum
Hoist the mainsail - here I come
Ain't no room on board for the insincere
You're my witness
I'm your mutineer

I was born to rock the boat
Some may sink but we will float
Grab your coat - let's get out of here
You're my witness
I'm your mutineer

Long ago we laughed at shadows
Lightning flashed and thunder followed
It could never find us here
You're my witness
I'm your mutineer

Long ago we laughed at shadows
Lightning flashed and thunder followed
It could never find us here
You're my witness
I'm your mutineer

I was born to rock the boat
Some may sink but we will float
Grab your coat - let's get out of here
You're my witness
I'm your mutineer
You're my witness
I'm your mutineer
I'm your mutineer.....

Important sources for this talk other than as noted in the text above:

*— <http://www.bjorner.com/bob.htm> Olof's files are the best historical source for Dylan performances, including his stage talk (magnificent: imagine if we had this for Homer!!!!!!) Olof is also in print now.
 — <http://my.execpc.com/~billp61/dates.html> up-to-date information on tours with set lists, reviews, links
 —Matthew Zuckerman, "If There's An Original Thought Out There, I Could Use It Right Now: The Folk Roots of Bob Dylan" <http://www.expectingrain.com/dok/div/influences.html>⁴
 —"Delia Dylan and Davis" <http://www.guitarseminars.com/ubb/Forum1/HTML/001558.html> on some of Dylan's sources for "Delia"

—Cecil Brown, *Stagolee Shot Billy* (2003) tracing a song tradition from 1895 to the 21st century
 —Francis James Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 5 Volume Set (Dover 2003)
 —Bob Dylan, *Chronicles Volume One* (2004) generous and more plain-spoken than was expected
 —Michael J. Gilmour, *Tangled Up in the Bible: Bob Dylan and Scripture* (2004)
 —David Hadju, *Positively 4th Street: The Lives and Times of Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Mimi Baez Farina and Richard Farina* (2002) wonderful on early Dylan and his genius
 —John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1994)
 —Greil Marcus, *Like A Rolling Stone: Bob Dylan at the Crossroads* (2005) some good observations on Dylan's realization of the song in the moment of performance
 —Christopher Ricks, *Dylan's Visions of Sins* (2004) insightful, erudite, witty, but a purely literary take
 —Eric Sackheim, *The Blues Line: A Collection of Blues Lyrics* (1969 repr. 1993)
 —Robert Shelton, *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan* (2003)
 —Sean Willentz and Greil Marcus eds. *The Rose and the Briar: Death, Love and Liberty in the American Ballad* (2005)
 —Oliver Trager, *Keys to the Rain: the Definitive Bob Dylan Encyclopedia* (2004) great on song histories
 —*Iliad* by Homer. trans. Lombardo, Stanley. Hackett: Indianapolis 1997
 —*Odyssey* by Homer. trans. Lombardo, Stanley. Hackett: Indianapolis 2000
 —*Works and Days, Theogony* by Hesiod. trans. Lombardo, Stanley. Hackett: Indianapolis 1993

SONG SELECTIONS PLAYABLE:		
HRC 1	BD 121261 I Was Young When I Left Home	5:48
HRC 2	Martin Carthy Lord Franklin	3:42
HRC 3	BD 020863 Bob Dylan's Dream	3:44
HRC 4	Blind W McTell Little Delia	3:04
HRC 5	BD 93 Delia GWG	5:44
HRC 6	C Patton High Water Everywhere Pt 1	3:03
HRC 7	BD 103002 High Water (for Charley Patton)	7:09
HRC 8	Stanley Bros Stone Walls Steel Bars	2:11
HRC 9	BD 051998 Stone Walls Steel Bars	3:05
HRC 10	BD 060984 Tangled Up in Blue	5:53
HRC 11	Stanley Bros Rank Strangers	3:10
HRC 12	BD 090488 Rank Strangers	4:01
HRC 13	BD 103002 Mutineer (Warren Zevon)	3:29
HRC 14	BD 091900 Delia	6:25
HRC 15	C Patton High Water Everywhere pt 2	3:01

"What made the real blues singers so great is that they were able to state all the problems they had, but at the same time, they were standing outside of them and could look at them. And in that way they had them beat. What's depressing today is that many young singers are trying to get *inside* the blues, forgetting that those older singers used them to get outside their troubles." Bob Dylan, sleeve-notes to *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (1963, cited in Ricks, p. 78).

¹ Lyrics and background fro Blind Willie McTell partially derived from:
<http://www.guitarseminars.com/ubb/Forum1/HTML/001558.html>. Lyrics corrected by me to match the version here heard.

² From the iner notes to *World Gone Wrong*. The two or more versions are at least Blind Willie McTell's and the Reverend Gary Davis's. Dylan is recorded singing at least a half dozen Reverend Gary Davis classics on the 1961 East Orange tape, May 1961 Minnesota Party,tape and the December 1961 Minnesota Hotel tape.

³ Lyrics from: http://blueslyrics.tripod.com/artistswithsongs/charley_patton_1.htm#top.

⁴ Also available in an edited quote-bite version at
http://www.eng.fju.edu.tw/iacd_99S/blues/Bob_Dylan/influence.html