

# TOP DOG

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BOB DYLAN

ACROSS THE  
BORDERLINE



# BOB DYLAN ACROSS THE BORDERLINE

by Tom Palaima

"I'm an honorary Texan," Bob Dylan said recently, while discussing what gives his latest CD "Together Through Life" its clear Texas-Mexico borderland feel. "It's no small thing. I take it as a high honor."

Dylan has long felt a connection with our two big parts of Nueva España. His sincere shout-out to Billy Joe Shaver on "Together Through Life's" "I Feel a Change Comin' On" is just one sample of the Tex-Mex flavors in his lyrical and musical spice box.

In 1972, he played with Doug Sahm and Band on their self-named album, helping to achieve what Dylan scholar Michael Gray calls a "fusion of loose yet sinewy Tex-Mex country-rock music." At the end of that year, Dylan moved with his wife and five children for three months to Durango, Mexico to act in Sam Peckinpah's movie "Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid." Dylan and Jacques Levy's 1975 "Romance in Durango" is full of images that Dylan absorbed while, in his own words, "deep in the heart of Mexico": Aztec ruins, blistering dusty heat, "hoofbeats like castanets on stone," and places "where our grandfathers stayed / When they rode with Villa into Torreón."

David Hidalgo's accordion now gives Dylan's music what Flaco Jiménez gave Dylan and Sahm's twenty-seven years ago. Seven years earlier, in 1965, one song stood out from the groundbreaking electric music on Dylan's "Highway 61 Revisited" album.

On "Desolation Row" Charlie McCoy and Dylan intertwined what Oliver Trager calls the "stately, Spanish-tinged sound" of two acoustic guitars. Their playing still takes us right down south of the border. In "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues" on the same album, Bob sets the scene "in the rain in Juarez." In 1969, Dylan wrote "Wanted Man" for Johnny Cash, taking the Man in Black to El Paso, Juarez and Abilene, "wonderin' why the hell I'm wanted / at some town halfway between."

Texas and Mexico have fired Bob Dylan's creative imagination again and again. His debut album, "Bob Dylan," recorded in November 1961, struck a powerful Texas chord. The twenty-year-old Dylan covered Blind Lemon Jefferson's "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean." Before Dylan headed off to New York City, Minnesota folk-music aficionado John Pankake had tuned him into the Texas blues legend's stark songs and to Austin-born music folklorist Alan Lomax's "Texas Folk Songs" album. Besides playing the cryptic 'everyman'

character named 'Alias' in "Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid," Dylan's films have titles like "Masked and Anonymous," "Don't Look Back," and "I'm Not There." Small wonder then that he is drawn to songs that capture the lives of men, women and children whose identities and worlds change when they cross the borderline. Many live namelessly or with false identities, fearfully and honestly outside the law.

Dylan was drawn to the borderland early on. When he hit New York City in 1961, the ailing Woody Guthrie was his guiding spirit. Guthrie had written a poem "Deportee" or "Plane Wreck at Los Gatos (Deportees)" in 1948. On January 28 that year, twenty-eight Mexican migrant workers died in a plane crash while being deported to Mexico, after the working season. Newspapers did not even list their names. Humanly offended, Guthrie wrote: "You won't have a name / when you ride the big airplane. / All they will call you will be / Deportee." He called out their names as he bid them farewell: "Goodbye to my Juan, goodbye Rosalita; adiós, mis amigos, Jesús y María."

Guthrie's words were finally set to music a decade later. Pete Seeger was making "Deportee" popular just when Dylan was using Guthrie as a role model. Dylan's later concert versions of "Deportee" with Joan Baez are incandescent.

Twenty-five years before going to Houston on "Together Through Life," Dylan made us see and feel our part of the plantation south through an old bluesman's sightless vision: "I traveled through east Texas / where many martyrs fell / And I know no one can sing the blues / like Blind Willie McTell."

Across three decades, beginning with a tape recording in the New Jersey home of good friends of Woody Guthrie in 1961 to a concert at West Point in October 1990, Dylan sang his own takes on the 19th-century folk song "Trail of the Buffalo." In Dylan's version, the 'young cowboy' hero calls Jacksboro, Texas home. And in 1992-93 when Dylan produced two powerful CD's full of traditional folk and blues songs, one standout classic is a tale of a cowboy who regrets riding his life away in the pay of a miserly, pompous, jaw-wagging herd boss named "Diamond Joe" whose "holdings are in Texas."

The Ry Cooder-John Hiatt-Jim Dickinson classic, "Across the Borderline," has been covered distinctively by both Flaco Jiménez and Willie Nelson. But Dylan took to the song as soon as he heard it. In 1986, a year before Ry Cooder even released his own version,

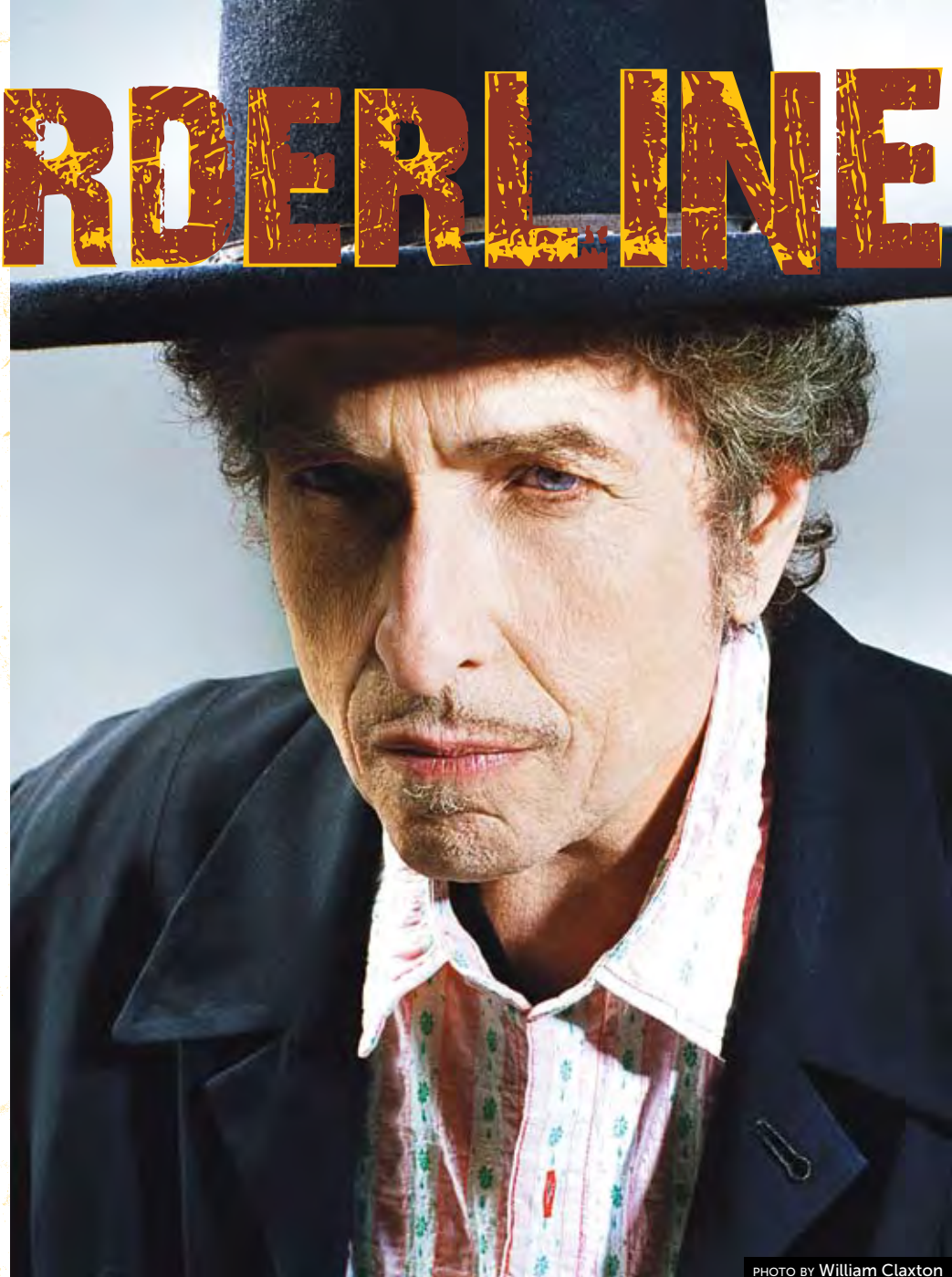


PHOTO BY William Claxton

*Dylan was drawn to the borderland early on. When he hit New York City in 1961, the ailing Woody Guthrie was his guiding spirit.*

Dylan sang the song many times on his tour with Tom Petty.

And when Dylan came down to Austin to celebrate Willie Nelson's sixtieth birthday in 1993, Willie and he sang together Townes Van Zandt's "Pancho and Lefty," a tale of outlaw heroism and betrayal, helped along by the 'kindness' of the Federales and enriched by what myths on both sides of the border mean to songwriters and singers.

Dylan has said that his own concert standard "Señor" from "Street Legal" (1978) was inspired by what he saw going on about midnight when he woke up from sleeping on a train in Monterrey, Mexico. An old man, dressed in nothing but a blanket, got on board and sat in

a seat right across from Dylan. "He must have been a hundred and fifty years old...his eyes were on fire and there was smoke coming out of his nostrils. I said, 'Well, this is the man I want to talk to.'"

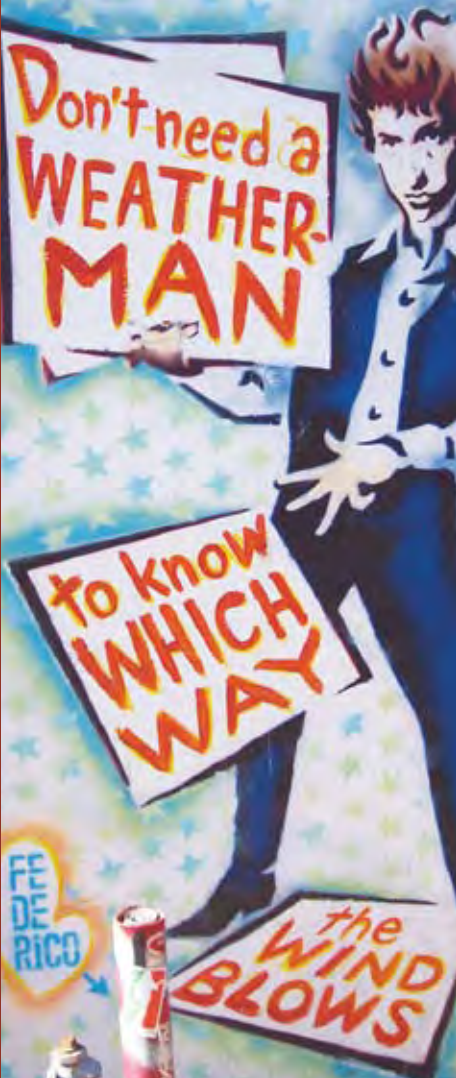
Sit down and explore Dylan's borderland music. You'll say, "Well, this is the man I want to listen to."

*University of Texas at Austin Classics professor Tom Palaima taught 'History of Song as Social Criticism from Homer to Bob Dylan' in Spring 2009.*



*Bob Dylan is a master of musical cultural assimilation. Whether it's the union-rousing anthems of Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie, the weary blues of Leadbelly and Robert Johnson or the soul-stirring gospel of the Staples, he has taken the most culturally potent music ever delivered and liberally borrowed its most accessible elements to color and flavor his own powerful compositions. What would "Desire" be without that haunting gypsy fiddle, or "Slow Train Coming" without the Muscle Shoals church organ and choir voices? While the choice of Hidalgo's accordion could merely be as simple as asking a West Coast neighbor to jam, it also brings with it a huge history of Tex-Mex tradition that permeates the songs with an entirely fresh rhythm and texture. The simple squeezebox riffs conjure up the spiciest south Texas dancehall echoes of Esteban Jordan and Augie Meyers. It sounds like a wild Westside San Antonio party with the spirits of Sir Doug and Bobby Blue Bland trading off on the mic. "Together Through Life" proves that the best music uses just three primary colors: black, brown and white. – by Paul Minor*

**The Bob Dylan Show**  
What: Bob Dylan & His Band, Willie Nelson and John Mellencamp  
When: 5:30 p.m., Tuesday, August 4  
Where: Dell Diamond, Round Rock  
Tickets: Available at [www.ticketmaster.com](http://www.ticketmaster.com)



MURAL ON THE SIDE OF THE HOLE IN THE WALL MUSIC CLUB ON GUADALUPE BY AUSTIN ARTIST EL FEDERICO



Dylan received the key to the City of Austin on February 24, 2002.



# Señor Dylan Bridging the Americas

By Gavin Lance Garcia

Music critics widely acknowledge that Dylan's latest CD, "Together Through Life," finds the bard's heart in a Texas "border-town": "Echoes of a Tex-Mex roadhouse" (USA Today), "a Tex-Mex feel" (Associated Press), "a Doug Sahm-like shot of norteño R&B" (Rolling Stone), "a Tejano flavor" (New York Post), "embroidered with Tex-Mex accordian" (Chicago Tribune), "Tex Mex ballads" (The New York Times), "Creole-Latino accordion playing sets the mood" (Los Angeles Times), "a Tex-Mex atmosphere" (The Observer).

HERE IS A SAMPLE OF SPANISH/LATIN AMERICAN REFERENCES FROM THE DYLAN CANON.

**1963 "Boots of Spanish Leather":** Two lovers are at a crossroads as one sails across the Atlantic for Spain and "the mountains of Madrid" and "coast of Barcelona." At the end of a dialogue, the forlorn lover left behind realizes his futility and requests a pair of boots to likewise go a-"roamin'."

**1963 "North Country Blues":** This first person narrative (of a woman whose husband has lost his job due to industry outsourcing) includes scrutiny of US economic exploitation in South America, where ore can be had "much cheaper" and "the miners work almost for nothing."

**1964 "Spanish Harlem Incident":** Dylan has said he has no idea what the song is about, but it appears the narrator's smitten by a gypsy girl who resides in "the hands of Harlem." In this West Side story, the gypsy's feet are on fire as she reads his palms and he marvels at her "pearly eyes" and "flashing diamond teeth."

**1965 "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues":** "When you're lost in the rain in Juárez . . ." Ciudad Juárez is a city in the state of Chihuahua, Mexico directly across from El Paso. The narrator visits the town at "Eastertime," marking the end of Lent by cavorting with prostitutes along Rue Morgue Avenue.

**1965 "Farewell Angelina":** A portrait of a man leaving a woman. By the edge of the sea, somewhere in Argentina (?), the protagonist's attention turns away from his gal to follow the sound of "the bells of the crown." "King Kong, little elves, on the rooftops they dance Valentino-type tangos" to the bells as the dead lie below.

**1967 "Goin' to Acapulco":** The setting of the seaport town of Acapulco de Juárez, known as "the paradise of the Americas," is where the song's protagonist finds himself yearning for the attention of "Rose Marie." Double entendres abound.

**1967 "Lo and Behold!":** Dylan pulls out of "San Anton'" with his first breath in this title, "never felt so good." Marianne Faithfull once said Dylan was "talking almost in sort of ancient tongues" during this recording with the Band, whose title is taken from the Old Testament in the King James Bible.

**1969 "Wanted Man":** A song about being on the run, recorded by Johnny Cash. Among the itinerary of the outlaw hero? El Paso, where the protagonist "stopped to get myself a map / Went the wrong way into Juarez with Juanita on my lap."

**1973 "Something There Is About You":** A sentimental journey to the bard's birthplace in Minnesota, where

the recollection of "the hills of old Duluth" bring to mind, among other memories, "Danny Lopez." Dylan's association of life's early stages to a Hispanic companion underscores a life-long love of the Latin.

**1974 "Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts":** NPR's Tim Riley calls this "an intricately evasive allegory about romantic façades that hide criminal motives." Big Jim spies his rival Jack in a cabaret and believes he has seen him before "down in Mexico."

**1975 "Romance in Durango":** Michael Gray states this song "raised the pop song onto an undreamt-of high plane." A tale of an outlaw and his sweetheart, Magdalena, on the run in Mexico, this is the archetypal Tex-Mex tune. "No llores, mi querida / Dios nos vigila / Soon the horse will take us to Durango. / Agarrame, mi vida / Soon the desert will be gone . . .," sings Dylan as he rides "past the Aztec ruins and the ghosts of our people."

**1975 "Abandoned Love":** Written, ostensibly, during a period of marital discord, the narrator locates romance where "The Spanish moon is rising on the hill / But my heart is a-tellin' me I love ya still."

**1978 "Señor (Tales of Yankee Power)":** Bob as Simón Bolívar, Che, Don Quixote? However interpreted, Dylan characters find themselves south of the border again. "The last thing I remember before I stripped and kneeled / Was that trainload of fools . . . their hearts is as hard as leather" has been decoded as a critique of US intervention in Latin America. Or a criticism of false Western values. Or . . .

**1981 "The Groom's Still Waiting at the Altar":** A woman addressed as Claudette haunts the narrator who remarks, "She could be respectably married or running a whorehouse in Buenos Aires." Dylan sings of a theological rift that eventually separates the protagonist from his heart's desire.

**1981 "Caribbean Wind":** "And them Caribbean winds still blow from Nassau to Mexico / Fanning the flames in the furnace of desire." Clinton Heylin states, here is Dylan "disaffected with love and on the run from the end times."

**1981 "Angelina":** A man returns to an old flame in a song full of mystery, political and Biblical allusions written during Dylan's "born again" period. Watching "a black Mercedes rollin' through the combat zone," he asks some "tall men" whether they'd like to be "overthrown maybe down in Jerusalem or Argentina?"

**1983 "Union Sundown":** A recurring motif in Dylan's canon is America's corporate greed and here he points a finger at the evils of imported consumer goods. The singer exclaims, "Well the job that you used to have / They gave it to somebody down in El Salvador," and "The car I drive is a Chevrolet / It was put together in Argentina / By a guy makin' thirty cents a day."

**1986 "Brownsville Girl":** Here's one about the girl along the Rio Grande that got away. The narrator reflects on what was, though he's clearly moved along. "We drove that car all night into San Anton' / And we slept near the Alamo, your skin was so tender and soft. / Way down in Mexico you went out to find a doctor and you never came back."