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

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 boomer Brandonon of a teenage daughter, thinks Bob has sold out. Worse yet, Bennetts says her daughter, a Victoria's Secret shopper, has had her limited age of Bob Dylan irreparably married.

But the image of 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 creativity. His music became a spokesman for anyone or any songs. It's outlets in Highland Mall and elsewhere advertise their main cause. Elsewhere, they advertised 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.

Dylan's music has enriched all our spirits with masterful renderings of American and British folk and blues. He introduced many listeners to forgotten musicians such as the American African-Blues group the Mississippi Sheiks. Here's a quote from Studs Terkel's interview with 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 book 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 hammer 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" when 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.

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