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"BLIND BOY GRUNT": BOB DYLAN

A YEAR AGO August, Bob Dylan had a motorcycle accident. Reports of his condition were vague, and he dropped out of sight. Publication of his book, *Tarantula*, was postponed indefinitely. New records appeared, but they were all taken from his last album, *Blonde on Blonde*. Gruesome rumors circulated: Dylan was dead; he was badly disfigured; he was paralyzed; he was insane. The cataclysm his audience was always expecting seemed to have arrived. (Topical singer Phil Ochs had predicted that Dylan might someday be assassinated by a fan. Pete Seeger believed Dylan could become the country's greatest troubadour, if he didn't explode. Alan Lomax had once remarked that Dylan might develop into a great poet of the times, unless he killed himself first.) As months passed, reflex apprehension turned to suspense, then irritation: had we been put on again? We had. Friends began to admit, with smiles, that they'd seen Bobby; he was rewriting his book; he was about to sign a contract with MGM Records. The new rumor was that the accident had been

a cover for retreat. After *Blonde on Blonde*, his intensive foray into the pop demi-monde, Dylan needed time to replenish his imagination. According to a less romantic version, he was keeping quiet till his contracts expired.

The confusion was typical. Not since Rimbaud said, "I is another," has an artist been so obsessed with escaping identity. His masks hidden by other masks, Dylan is the celebrity-stalker's ultimate antagonist. The original disparity between his public pose as rootless wanderer with southwestern drawl and the private facts of middle-class Jewish family and high school diploma in Hibbing, Minnesota, was a commonplace subterfuge, the kind that pays reporters' salaries. It hardly showed his talent for elusiveness; what it probably showed was naivete. But his attitude toward himself as a public personality was always clear. On an early recording, he used the eloquent pseudonym "Blind Boy Grunt." Dylan is itself a pseudonym, possibly inspired by Dylan Thomas (an ascription Dylan now denies), possibly by a real or imaginary uncle

named Dillon, who might or might not be the "Las Vegas dealer" Dylan once claimed was his only living relative.

There is, to be sure, a continuing self, the Bobby Dylan friends describe as shy and defensive, hyped up, careless of his health, a bit scared by fame, unmaterialistic but shrewd about money, a professional absorbed in his craft. Dylan's songs bear the stigmata of an authentic middle-class adolescence; his eye for detail, his sense of humor, and his skill at evoking archetypal sexual skirmishes, show that some part of him is of, as well as in, the world. As further evidence, he has a real wife, a son, and a house in Woodstock, New York. But his refusal to be known is not simply a celebrity's ploy. As his songs become more introspective, the introspections become more impersonal, the confidences of a no-man without past or future. Bob Dylan as identifiable *persona* has disappeared into his songs. This terrifies his audiences. They could accept a consistent image in lieu of the "real" Bob Dylan, but his progressive self-

This is part one of a two part series on Bob Dylan; by Ellin Willis, a young writer whose work has appeared in *Mademoiselle* and the *Saturday Evening Post*.

annihilation cannot be contained in a game of let's pretend. Instead of an image, Dylan has created a magic theater from which his public cannot escape.

IN FIVE YEARS, Dylan's stance has evolved from proletarian assertiveness to anarchist *Angst* to pop detachment. At each stage he has made himself harder to follow, provoked howls of execration from those left behind, and attracted an ever-larger, more demanding audience. He has reacted with growing hostility to the possessiveness of this audience and its shock troops, the journalists, the professional categorizers. His baroque press conference inventions are extensions of his work, full of imaginative truth and virtually devoid of information. The classic Dylan interview appeared in *Playboy*, where Nat Hentoff, like a housewife dusting her furniture while a tornado wrecks the house, pursued the homely fact through exchanges like: "Do you have any unfulfilled ambitions?" "Well, I guess I've always wanted to be Anthony Quinn in *La Strada*. . . . I guess I've always wanted to be Brigitte Bardot, too; but I don't really want to think about *that* too much." Sometimes Dylan gets nasty. In *Don't Look Back*, the film documentary of his 1964 English tour, he harangues a pathetic *Time* reporter in a mean-spirited inversion of *noblesse oblige*.

Many people hate Bob Dylan because they hate being fooled. Illusion is fine, if quarantined and diagnosed as mild; otherwise it is potentially humiliating (Is he laughing at me? Conning me out of my money?). Some discount Dylan as merely a popular culture hero (how can a teen-age idol be a serious artist?—at most, perhaps, a serious demagogue). But the most tempting answer to such charges—forget the public presence, listen to his songs—won't do in this case, for Dylan has exploited his image as a vehicle for artistic statement. (The same is true of Andy Warhol and, to a lesser degree, of the Beatles and Allen Ginsberg; in contrast, James Dean and Marilyn Monroe were creatures, not masters, of their images.) The tenacity of the modern publicity apparatus often makes artists' personalities more familiar than their work, while its pervasiveness obscures the work of those who cannot or will not be personalities. If there is an audience for images, artists will inevitably use the image as a medium—and some images are more original, more compelling, more relevant than others. Dylan has self-consciously explored the possibilities of mass communication just as the pop artists explored the possibilities of mass production. In the same sense that pop art is about commodities, Dylan's art is about celebrity.

This is not to deny the intrinsic value of Dylan's songs. Everyone interested in folk and popular music agrees on their importance, if not on their merit. As composer, interpreter, most of all as lyricist, Dylan has made a revolution. He expanded folk idiom into a rich, figurative language, grafted literary and philosophical subtleties onto the protest song, revitalized folk version by rejecting proletarian and ethnic sentimentality, then all but destroyed pure folk as a contemporary form

by merging it with pop. Rock-and-roll, already in the midst of a creative flowering dominated by British rock and the smooth Negro Motown sound, was transformed. Songwriters raided folk music as never before for new sounds, new images, new subject matter. Dylan's innovative lyrics were enthusiastically imitated. Ever since, his profligate talents have been a major influence in popular music. The folk-music lovers who managed to evolve with him, the connoisseurs of pop, the bohemian fringe of the literary community, the turned-on searchers after absolute experience, and of course teenagers consider him a genius, a prophet. Folk purists and political radicals who were inspired by his earlier material, cry betrayal with a vehemence that acknowledges his gifts.

Yet many of Dylan's fans—especially ex-fans—miss the point. Dylan is no apostle of the electronic age. Rather, he is a fifth-columnist from the past, shaped by personal and political non-conformity, by blues and modern poetry. He has imposed his commitment to individual freedom (and its obverse, isolation) on the hip passivity of pop culture, his literacy on an illiterate music. He has used the publicity machine to demonstrate his belief in privacy. His songs and public role are guides to survival in the world of the image, the cool, and the high. And in coming to terms with that world, he has forced it to come to terms with him.

By 1960, the folk music revival that began in the 50's had expanded into an all-inclusive smorgasbord, with kitschy imitation-folk groups at one end, resurrected cigar-box guitarists and Ozark balladeers at the other. Of music that pretended to ethnic authenticity, the most popular was folk blues—Leadbelly, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, Lightnin' Hopkins. The widespread enthusiasm for blues was in part a tribute to the ascendancy of rock-and-roll—in the 50's, Negro rhythms had affected the consciousness of every teenager in the land. But blues, unlike rock, was free of identification with the dominant society. Its sexuality and rebelliousness were undiluted, and its subject matter was people, not teenagers. Besides, the Negro, always a symbol of both suffering and life-force, was gaining new political importance, and folk blues expressed the restlessness of activists, bohemians, declassé intellectuals. Since younger Negro performers were not interested in preserving a genre they had abandoned for more distinctly urban forms, white city singers tried to fill the gap. Patronized unmercifully by blues purists, the best of them went beyond the simple approximation of Negro sounds to evoke personal pain and disenchantment with white culture.

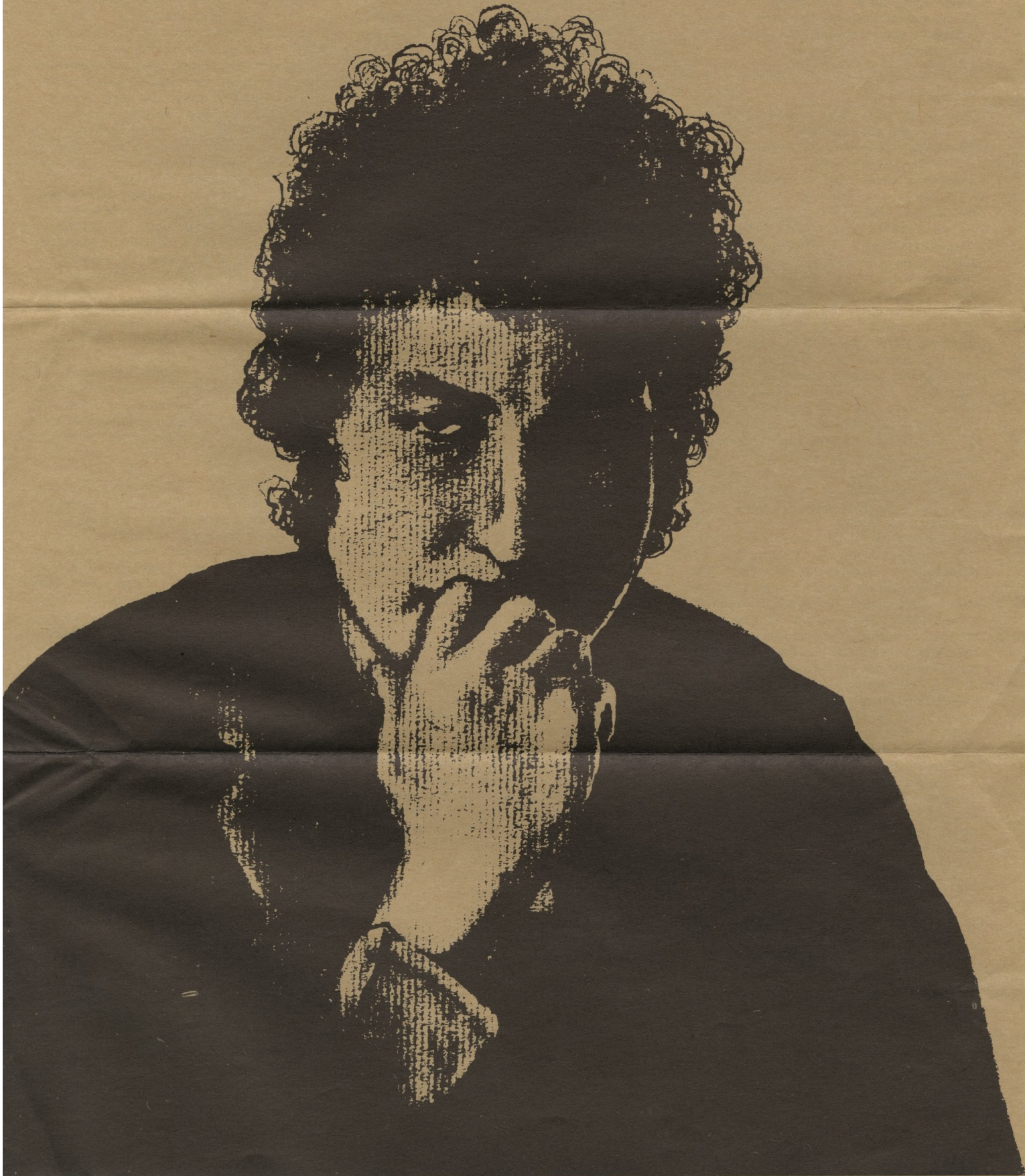
At the same time, there was a surge of folk composing. The Weavers, in the vanguard of the revival, had popularized the iconoclastic ballads and talking blues of Woody Guthrie, chronicler of the dust bowl and depression, the open road, the unions, the common man as intrepid endurer. Pete Seeger, the Weavers' lead singer in the early days and the most prestigious folk musician in the country, had recorded albums of topical songs from the 30's and 40's. With the emergence of the civil-

rights movement, freedom songs, some new, some updated spirituals and union chants, began coming out of the South. Northern musicians began to write and perform their own material, mainly variations on the hard-traveling theme and polemics against racism, the bomb, and middle-class conformity. Guthrie was their godfather, Seeger their guru, California songwriter Malvina Reynolds their older sister. Later they were to acquire an angel—Joan Baez, who would record their songs and sing them at racial demonstrations and peace rallies; an organ—*Broadside*, a mimeographed magazine founded in 1962; and a sachem—Bob Dylan.

Gerde's Folk City, an unassuming, unbohemian cabaret in Greenwich Village, was the folk fans' chief New York hangout. On Monday, hootenanny night, blues interpreters like Dave Van Ronk, bluegrass groups like the Greenbriar Boys, the new topical songwriters—Tom Paxton, Phil Ochs, Len Chandler—would stop in and perform. Established singers came because Gerde's was part of the scene, because they enjoyed playing to the aficionados who gathered after midnight. The young ones came for a showcase and for contact with musicians they admired.

When Bob Dylan first showed up at Gerde's in the spring of 1961, fresh-skinned and baby-faced and wearing a schoolboy's corduroy cap, the manager asked him for proof of age. He was nineteen, only recently arrived in New York, skinny, nervous, and Manic, the bohemian patina of jeans and boots, scruffy hair, hip jargon, and hitchhiking mileage barely settled on nice Bobby Zimmerman. He had been trying to catch on at the coffeeshouses. His material and style was a cud of half-digested influences: Guthrie cum Elliott; Blind Lemon Jefferson cum Leadbelly cum Van Ronk; the hillbilly sounds of Hank Williams and Jimmie Rodgers; the rock-and-roll of Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley. He was constantly writing new songs. On stage, he alternated between poignancy and clownishness. His interpretations of traditional songs—especially blues—were pretentious, and his harsh, flat voice kept slipping over the edge of plaintiveness into strident self-pity. But he shone as a comedian, charming audiences with Charlie Chaplin routines, playing with his hair and cap, burlesquing his own mannerisms, and simply enjoying himself. His specialty was composing lightly sardonic talking blues—chants to a bass run guitar accompaniment, a favorite vehicle of Woody Guthrie's: "Them Communists were all around/in the air and on the ground/. . . I run down most hurriedly/and joined the John Birch society."

That fall, Robert Shelton, folk music critic for the *New York Times*, visited Gerde's and gave Dylan an enthusiastic review. Columbia Records signed him and released a mediocre first album in February, 1962. It contained only two Dylan compositions, both non-political (Columbia had decided protest was not commercial). Dylan began publishing his topical songs in *Broadside*. Like his contemporaries, he was more propagandist than artist; his syntax was often barbarous, his diction crude. Even so, his work stood out—



it contained the most graphic descriptions of racial atrocities. But Dylan also had a gentler mood. Road songs like "Song to Woody" strove—rather unsuccessfully—for Guthrie's expressive understatement and simple, traditional sound.

IN MAY 1962, *Broadside* published a new Dylan song:

*How many roads must a man walk down
before you call him a man?*

*How many seas must a white dove sail before
she sleeps in the sand?*

*How many times must the cannonballs fly
before they're forever banned?*

*The answer, my friend, is blowing in the
wind, the answer is blowing in the wind.**

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Set to a melody adapted from a spiritual, "Blowin' in the Wind" combined indignation with Guthriesque simplicity and added a touch of original imagery. It received little circulation until nearly a year later, when Peter, Paul, and Mary, a slick folk trio, heard Dylan sing it at a coffeehouse. Their recording of the song sold a million copies, inspired more than fifty other versions, and established topical song as the most important development of the folk revival. The relative subtlety of the lyric made the topical movement aesthetically self-conscious. It did not drive out direct political statements—but it set a standard that could not be ignored. Topical songs began to show more wit, more craftsmanship, more variety.

"Blowin' in the Wind" was included in Dylan's second album, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, which appeared in May 1963. This time, nearly all the songs were his own; five had political themes. It was an extraordinary record. The influences had coalesced; the voice, unmusical as ever, had found an evocative range somewhere between abrasion and sentimentality; the lyrics (except for "Masters of War," a simplistic diatribe against munitions-makers) were vibrant and pithy. The album contained what may still be Dylan's best song—"It's A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall," a vivid evocation of nuclear apocalypse that owed much to Allen Ginsberg's biblical rhetoric and declamatory style. Its theme was modern, its spirit ancient. At first hearing, most of the *Freewheelin'* songs sounded less revolutionary than they were: so skillfully had Dylan distilled the forms and moods of traditional music that his originality took time to register.

Freewheelin' illuminated Dylan's America—or rather, two Americas. "Hard Rain" confronted the underside, "where the executioner's face is always well-hidden," "where black is the color and none is the number," a world of deserted diamond highways, incipient tidal waves, clowns crying in alleys, children armed with guns and swords, "ten thousand whisperin and nobody listenin" and occasional portents of redemption: "I met a young girl, she gave me a rainbow." The satirical "Talking World War III Blues" toured the country's surface: hot-dog stands, parking meters, Cadillac, rock-and-roll singers, telephone operators, cool females, officious doctors. Dylan's

moral outrage coexisted with a grudging affection for American society and its foibles. Alongside "Masters of War" there was "I Shall Be Free": "My telephone rang, it would not stop, it was President Kennedy callin me up./ He said my friend Bob what do we need to make this country grow I said my friend John, Brigitte Bardot."

For a time, the outrage predominated. Dylan's output of bitter protest increased and his humor receded. He was still learning from Woody Guthrie, but he often substituted despair for Guthrie's resilience: his finest ballads chronicled the disintegration of an unemployed miner's family; the killing of a Negro maid, punished by a six-month sentence; the extremity of a penniless farmer who shot himself, his wife, and five kids. At the same time, his prophetic songs discarded the pessimism of "Hard Rain" for triumph in "The Times They Are a-Changin'" and vindictiveness in "When the Ship Comes In": "Then they'll raise their hands, say we'll meet all your demands/and we'll shout from the bow, your days are numbered."

It was Dylan's year. Stimulated by the wide acceptance of his work, inspired by his ideas and images, topical songwriters became more and more prolific. Dylan songs were recorded by dozens of folk singers, notably Joan Baez (at whom he had once sneered, "She's still singing about Mary Hamilton. Where's that at?"). No folk concert was complete without "Hard Rain," or "Don't Think Twice," or a protest song from Dylan's third album, *The Times They Are A-Changin'*. The college folk crowd imitated Dylan; civil-rights workers took heart from him; masochistic journalists lionized him. And in the attenuated versions of Peter, Paul, and Mary, the Chad Mitchell Trio, even Lawrence Welk, his songs reached the fraternity house and the suburb.

Then Dylan yanked the rug: he renounced political protest. He put out an album of personal songs, and in one of them, "My Back Pages," scoffed at his previous moral absolutism. His refrain—"Ah, but I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now"—seemed a slap at the 30's Left. And the song contained scraps of uncomfortably private imagery—hints of aesthetic escapism?

Folk devotees were shocked at Dylan's apostasy. Folk music and social protest have always fed on each other, and the current revival had been political all along. For children of depression activists growing up in the Eisenhower slough, folk music was a way of keeping the faith. When they converged on the Weavers' Town Hall hootenannies, they came as an anti-McCarthy resistance, pilgrims to the shrine of the 30's. The Weavers had been blacklisted for alleged Communist connections; Pete Seeger had been *there* singing for the unions, for the Spanish Republic. It didn't matter what they sang—in the atmosphere of conspiratorial sympathy that permeated those performances, even "Greensleeves" had radical overtones. Later, as the Left revived, folk singing became a badge of involvement, an expression of solidarity, and most important, a history-in-the-raw of social and political struggle. Now, Dylan's defection threatened

the last aesthetically respectable haven for believers in proletarian art.

Dylan had written personal songs before, but they were songs that accepted folk conventions. Narrative in impulse, nostalgic but restless in mood, their central image was the road and its imperative. They complemented his protest songs: Here was an outlaw, unable to settle for one place, one girl, a merely private life, committed to that symbolic onward journey. His new songs were more psychological, limning characters and relationships. They substituted ambition for the artless perfection of his best early songs; "It Ain't Me, Babe," a gloss on the spiritual possessiveness of women, took three stanzas to say what "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right" had suggested in a few phrases: "I'm thinking and wonderin', walkin' down the road/I once loved a woman, a child I'm told/gave her my heart but she wanted my soul." Dylan's language was opening up—doves sleeping in the sand were one thing, "crimson flames tied through my ears" quite another. And his tone was also changing: in his love songs, ingenuousness began to yield to self-possession, the spontaneity of the road to the gamesmanship of the city. These were transitional songs, full of half-realized ideas; having rejected the role of people's bard, Dylan had yet to find a new niche.

IN RETROSPECT, Dylan's break with the topical song movement seemed inevitable. He had modeled himself on Woody Guthrie, whose incessant traveling was an emotional as well as an economic necessity, whose commitment to radical politics was rooted in an individualism as compulsive as Dylan's own. But Guthrie had had to organize or submit; Dylan had other choices. For Guthrie, the road was habitat; for Dylan, metaphor. The closing of the iron mines had done to Hibbing what drought had done to Guthrie's Oklahoma, but while Guthrie had been a victim Dylan was a bystander. A voluntary refugee from middle-class life, more aesthete than activist, he had less in common with the Left than with literary rebels—Blake, Whitman, Rimbaud, Crane, Ginsberg.

The beauty of "Hard Rain" was that it exploited poetry while remaining a folk lyric, simple, repetitive, seemingly uncontrived. Now Dylan became self-consciously poetic, adopting a neo-heat style loaded with images. Though he had rejected traditional political categories, his new posture was if anything more scornful of the social order than before. "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" attacked both the "human gods" who "make everything from toy guns that spark to flesh-colored Christs that glow in the dark" and their acquiescent victim, who "gargles in the ratrace choir." "Gates of Eden," like "Hard Rain," descended into a surreal netherworld, the menace this time a psychic bomb, the revolt of repressed instinct: "The motorcycle black madonna two-wheeled gypsy queen/and her silver-studded phantom cause the gray flannel dwarf to scream." As poetry these songs were overrated—*Howl* had said it all much better—and they were unmusical, near-



chants declaimed to a monotonous guitar strum. Yet the perfunctory music made the bohemian commonplaces work—made them fresh. Perhaps it was the context: though few people realized it yet, the civil-rights movement was losing its moral force; the Vietnam juggernaut was becoming the personal concern of every draft-eligible man; a new generation of bohemians, more expansive and less cynical than the beats, was about to blossom. The time was right for a reaffirmation of individual revolt.

BUT DYLAN had also been exposed to a very different vision: in May, 1964, he had toured an England transformed by mod fashion and the unprecedented excitement over the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. When his new record came out the following spring, its title was *Bringing It All Back Home*. On the album jacket, a chiaroscuro Dylan, bright face emerging from ominous shadows, stared accusingly at the viewer. In black suit and striped shirt, he perched on a long divan, hugging a cat, behind him a modish, blank-faced beauty in scarlet lounging pajamas. The room, wreathed in light and dominated by a baroque mantelpiece, abounded with artifacts—*Time*, a movie magazine, a fallout shelter sign, folk and pop records (including earlier Dylan), a portrait, a candlestick, a few mysterious objects obscured by the halo.

Most of side one was devoted to "Gates of Eden" and "It's Alright, Ma." But the most arresting cut on the side was "Mr. Tambourine Man," a hymn to the psychedelic quest: "take me disappearing through the smoke-rings of my mind/down the foggy ruins of time/ . . . take me on a trip upon your magic swirling ship." Drug-oriented bohemians loved it; it was another step away from the sober-sides. It was also more like a folk song than anything Dylan had written since giving up politics, a spiritual road song with lilting, singable melody.

The other side was rock-and-roll, Dylan on electric guitar and piano backed by a five-man band. It was not hard rock. There was no overdubbing, and Dylan played his amplified guitar folk-style. But the beat was there, and the sound, if not overwhelming, was big enough to muffle some of the lyrics. These dispensed a new kind of folk wisdom. Chaos had become a condition, like the weather, not to analyze or prophesy but to gripe about, cope with, dodge: "Look out, kid, it's some-thin you did/God knows when but you're doin it again." The message was: pay attention to what's happening—"Don't follow leaders, watch the parkin meters."

One rock song, "Subterranean Homesick Blues," was released as a single. As Dylan's pop debut it was a modest success, hovering halfway up the *Cash Box* and *Billboard* charts. That summer, Dylan cut "Like a Rolling Stone," the most scurrilous and, with its powerful beat, the most dramatic in a long line of non-love songs beginning with "Don't Think Twice":

*You used to ride on the chrome horse with
your diplomat
who carried on his shoulder a Siamese cat*

*ain't it hard when you discovered that he
wasn't really where it's at
after he took from you everything he could
steal.**

It was a number one hit, as "Blowin' in the Wind" had been two years before—only now it was Dylan's own expressive snarl coming over radio and jukebox.

"Rolling Stone" opened Dylan's first all-rock album, *Highway 61 Revisited*. More polished but less daring than *Bringing It All Back Home*, the album reworked familiar motifs. The title song, which depicted the highway as junkyard, temple, and arena for war, was Dylan's best face-of-America commentary since "Talking World War III Blues." The witty and scarfifying "Ballad of a Thin Man," which derided the rationalist bewildered by the instinctual revolt was an updated "Times They Are a-Changin'," with battle lines redrawn according to pop morality. Dylan did not hail the breakdown of sanity he described but merely kept his cool, mocking Mr. Jones (the pop equivalent of Mr. Charlie) for his squareness: "The sword-swallower he comes up to you and then he kneels/ . . . and he says here is your throat back, thanks for the loan/ and something is happening but you don't know what it is, do you, Mr. Jones?" "Desolation Row" was Dylan's final tribute to the *Gotterdammerung* strain in modern literature—an eleven-minute freak show whose cast of losers, goons, and ghosts wanders around in a miasma of sexual repression and latent violence underscored by the electronic beat: "Einstein disguised as Robin Hood . . . /passed this way an hour ago with his friend, a jealous monk/now he looked so immaculately frightful as he bummed a cigarette/then he went off sniffing drainpipes and reciting the alphabet."

The violent hostility of traditionalists to Dylan's rock-and-roll made the previous uproar over "My Back Pages" seem mild. Even bohemians called him a sellout and a phony. At the July 1965 Newport Folk Festival, he appeared with his electric guitar and was booed off the stage. Alan Lomax, America's foremost authority on folk song, felt Dylan had chucked his artistry for a big audience and forsaken a mature culture for one that was evanescent and faddish. Tom Paxton, dean of the 60's topical songwriters, commented: "Where it's at' is a synonym for 'rich.'"

Defiantly, Dylan exacerbated the furor, insisting on his contempt for message songs and his indifference to causes, refusing to agonize over his wealth or his taxes ("Uncle Sam, he's my *uncle!* Can't turn your back on a member of the family!"). In one notorious interview, he claimed he had written topical songs only to get published in *Broadside* and attract attention. Many former fans took the bait. Actually, Dylan's work still bristled with messages; his "opportunism" had absorbed three years of his life and produced the finest extensions of traditional music since Guthrie. But the purists believed Bob Dylan because they wanted to, although their passion told less about Dylan than about their own compound of aristocratic and proletarian sensitivities. For them, popular music—

especially rock-and-roll—symbolized the displacement of the true folk by the mass. Rock was not created by the people but purveyed by the communications industry. The performer was incidental to the engineer and the publicity man. The beat was moronic, the lyrics banal teen-age trivia.

These were half-truths. From the beginning, there had been a bottom-up as well as a top-down movement in rock-and-roll. Negro kids from Harlem, Italian kids from Philadelphia, formed groups and wrote songs; white country singers adopted the rhythm-and-blues beat of urban Negroes. Rock-and-roll united teenagers from Watts to Malibu, from Detroit to Dallas. In its own way it was a music of protest—not against a mechanized acquisitive society, which it took for granted, but against the arbitrariness of parents energy and love and sex. The mediocrity of most performers only made rock-and-roll more authentic—anyone could sing it—and one of the few remaining vindications of the American dream—any kid from the slums might become a millionaire. (The best singers, of course, were fine interpreters; Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry did not have golden voices, but neither did Leadbelly or Woody Guthrie.) Rock-and-roll was further from the grass roots than traditional music, but closer than any other kind of pop. If the sentimentalists did not recognize this, the average adult did—hence his condemnation of the music for its adolescent surliness and its sexuality, covert in the lyrics, overt in the beat and in the intense response of the audience to its idols.

But it remained for the British renaissance to prove that the mainstream of mass culture could produce folk music—that is, anti-establishment music. The Beatles, commercial without apology, delighted in the Americanized decadence of their environment. Yet their enthusiasm was subversive—they endorsed the reality of the culture, not its official myths. The Rolling Stones were iconoclastic in a different way: deliberately ugly, blatantly erotic, they exuded contempt for the public while making a fortune. Their cynicism, like Leadbelly's violence or Charlie Parker's heroin, was part of their charisma; unlike traditional folk singers, they could cheerfully censor their lyrics for Ed Sullivan without seeming domesticated—the effect was more as if they had paraded a sign saying "Bland CBS." British rock was far superior to most early rock-and-roll. Times had changed: electronic techniques were more sophisticated; radio stations and record companies were less squeamish about sexual candor; teen culture was merging into a more mature, less superficial youth culture with semi-bohemian tastes. Most important, the British groups successfully assimilated Negro music, neither vitiating rhythm-and-blues nor imitating it, but refining it to reflect their own milieu: white, lower-class urban, technological, materialistic, toughminded.

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