



Me and Bob Dylan

Well I have to write this WZ about Dylan. I mean, he has nailed the Nobel Prize in Literature! This on top of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, eleven Grammys, an Academy Award, a Golden Globe Award, an induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame, a special Pulitzer Prize "special citation," and many, many more.

As I've mentioned before, I do have mixed feelings about how American culture has turned into a cavalcade of contests. I was in Michigan last Sunday and after the gig we went to a sports bar where there were two huge screens over the back bar. On one screen was the Packer game and on the other was the second presidential debate. The sound was on for both events and people were cheering and booing alternately for a presidential candidate and a football team, in the same tone of voice. It was weird.

But maybe this is sour grapes. I had my eye on the Nobel Prize and still wonder how the committee can pass by such of my lyrics as:

*Her nose is like a steamship
Grounded in the parlor
Her eyes are like Chicago
An hour after dawn*

*And when she wants to see me
She writes it on a kumquat
And rolls it 'round the dog dish
Until the urge is gone.*

Can you see the Dylan influence there? No? Well anyway, as with most songwriters my age, Dylan was among those artists who started me writing songs, and poems too. I was in high school, and a bunch of us had bolted from the established high school newspaper and had formed our own underground version. This was in 1964, the first semester of my senior year. I remember being part

of a response poem in which I argued with someone in a Dylan style of writing, in response to HIS Dylan-styled writing. And by "Dylan styled," I mostly mean dropping the "g" from "-ing" word endings, and using "ain't." "I'm goin' down a-fightin' and I ain't a-gonna quit." But I was also moved by Dylan to write songs with that Tambourine Man feeling of being dazzled by wind, and night, and longing, and so forth. I was a big fan of Kerouac by then too and it was all very heady.

The first Dylan song I learned, along with 300,000 other plunkers, was **Blowin' in the Wind**, from the **Free-wheelin' Bob Dylan** album of 1963, though I may have learned it via Peter Paul & Mary's version which came out three weeks later.

But I do remember learning **The Ballad of Hollis Brown** and **When The Ship Comes In** directly from the 1964 Dylan album, **The Times They Are A-Changin'**. I especially remember playing the latter, sitting on the hood of my family's flamingo pink 1959 Plymouth wagon at the Peninsula State Park campground in Door County. I had just bought my second-hand 12-string Harmony guitar. (That was a memorable camping trip, probably the last one I took with my family. My youngest sister Susannah and I stayed up half the night in our own tent making up centipede jokes, the traditional one being "What goes 99 thump, 99 thump? A centipede with a wooden leg." We made up dozens of these, the apex being Susannah's: "What goes 50, 50, 50, 100, 50, 100, 50, 50, 100, 50, 100, 50, 50, 50? A centipede playing hopscotch.")

Not sure why I picked those songs to learn. I do remember liking the starkness of **Hollis Brown**, and it was easy to play. I don't think I could have picked a more different Dylan song from that than **When the Ship Comes In**, which was surreal and upbeat compared to the grim, straightforward, and depressing **Hollis Brown**.

As with most of us Boomers, Dylan has delighted, awed, disappointed, and charmed me through the years. After

Nashville Skyline came out, I actually wrote a long and supposedly funny imitation Dylan song, which I mortify myself by actually performing now and then. Many years ago everyone seemed to have an imitation Dylan song and I'm as embarrassed by mine as I'm sure everyone else is by theirs.

I only saw Dylan in person twice. The first time was in 1964 when he was to perform at Milwaukee's Oriental Theater. A bunch of us drove down from Appleton and got a pretty good seat. As it turned out, the truck carrying the sound system apparently was in an accident. Dylan came out and started singing without amplification, which didn't work at all. He then waved everyone to leave their seats and pile toward the stage. I actually touched his boot. He tried singing again and THAT didn't work out, so he left. He had sung maybe twenty words. We were refunded our money and drove sullenly back to Appleton.

The next time was in Madison with my wife Kristi, in 2004, exactly forty years later. Dylan and Willie Nelson were playing a double bill in various small ballparks around the country. Willie put on a great show, with lyrics clear as a bell. Dylan came out and played keyboard, standing, never moving an inch. He had on like a white suit and white big brimmed hat. The sound was horrible, which was odd because it was the same system Willie had used.

He was at least halfway through **Mr. Tambourine Man** before we recognized it, due to the wretched sound and his lackluster stylings. We actually went home halfway through the show. I still find it hard to say that, though it's true, Nobel prize or no, but have to add that this didn't diminish my adoration of the man's work.

So there you go; that's my life with Bob Dylan. Huge congrats to him and hooray for his winning the Nobel Prize; how cool. I love it. And incidentally, I'm still very proud of my 8th grade second place ping pong ribbon, despite my silly indignation about contests.

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