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Songs of Freedom, Songs of Protest
Part Four: Bob Dylan "It Ain't Me Babe"

L-R: A young Bob Dylan and Joan Baez at the March on Washington, August 28th, 1963; President Barack Obama presents Bob Dylan with the Medal of Freedom May 29, 2012.

Once, some years ago, at an NCAA meeting, of all things, I sat at one of those round tables for ten that are conference meeting luncheon staples. As I recall, there were eight or nine of us, none of us knew each other and someone proposed an ice breaker to, well, to break the ice. It was proposed that we tell something about ourselves no one was ever likely to guess. I told them I had once been a chimney sweep, but a woman across the table said, “My mother was Bob Dylan’s high school girl friend”.

Her mother was, literally, the girl from the North Country, of whom Dylan sang:

from Girl from the North Country
Well, if you’re travelin’ in the north country fair

Where the winds hit heavy on the borderline
Remember me to one who lives there
She once was a true love of mine . . .
I'm a-wonderin' if she remembers me at all
Many times I've often prayed
In the darkness of my night
In the brightness of my day . . . [1]

As everything with Bob Dylan, there is some ambiguity about her identity. I don't recall the woman's name at the NCAA meeting, so I can't verify her claim. A woman named Bonnie Beecher is sometimes mentioned, but the person most frequently identified as the "girl from the north country" is Echo Helstrom. Helstrom's obituaries – she died in January 2018 at age 75 -- all note her relationship at Hibbing High School with Bob Zimmerman, who took her to the prom in 1958 and wrote: "in her yearbook, 'Let me tell you that your beauty is second to none. Love to the most beautiful girl in school'". [2]

Bob Dylan – he's everywhere and he's nowhere, but he is most definitely not The Beatles "Nowhere Man" "sitting in his nowhere land/Making all his nowhere plans for nobody". [3]

He's been center-stage in American culture for sixty years – count 'em! At eighty, he's still giving voice to truths many can't hear, although he long ago rejected being strait-jacketed as "the voice of a generation". No, he's not the voice of a generation; he's the voice of generations.

Recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature "for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition", he might also be the greatest poet of his generation. [4] Although Dylan himself expressed surprise at the award, remarking that "If someone had ever told me that I had the slightest chance of winning the Nobel Prize, I would have to think that I'd have about the same odds as standing on the moon". [5] Regardless of his surprise, a case can be made that he is, if not the greatest poet of his generation, then he is certainly one of the most important American, if not global, poets of his time.

In fact, researching for this ***Note*** I was stunned rediscovering the scope of Dylan's accomplishment. Since at least the early-mid-1960s I have been an on-again, off-again Bob Dylan – I don't like the word "fan", borrowed from sports culture and shorthand for "fanatic" – so, let's say that for a long time I have been an appreciator of Dylan's art, but I am not a "Dylanologist" like Richard Thomas, who wrote ***Why Bob Dylan Matters***. [6] Like Thomas, however, I've begun to realize that Bob Dylan matters; that he is, in fact, David Foster Wallace, Thomas Pynchon, Margaret Atwood, Philip Glass, Stephen Spielberg and whomever else one cares to name notwithstanding, that Dylan is our generation's greatest artist.

Such an assertion requires a theory, as Louis Menand points out somewhere in his encyclopedic history of art and thought during the Cold War era, ***The Free World***. [7] I have said repeatedly in previous ***Book Notes*** that the poetry I admire must deploy plain, lucid language helping one become more *present-to-the-present* thereby becoming more *present-to-oneself*. In a future ***Book Notes***, or series of ***Notes***, I'll try to defend that assertion by developing that theory exploring Bob Dylan's art.

For now, the question of the moment asks, "Is he (or was he) a protest singer?"

The answer to which is, as are many things involving Bob Dylan, '*Yes* and *No* and *Yes* again'.

First, what is a protest singer? Simplistically, a protest singer sings protest songs, which, as any first-year logic student will quickly tell me, is fallacious, circular reasoning. So, to break the circle and go back to the beginning, what is a protest song? As I said in *Book Notes* # 71, which can be found here:

"While the musical style may be rock, classical, pop or folk in form, a protest song comments on current events as it seeks to alter or change society or society's values. Protest songs are cause-oriented. They speak to a social wrong needing correction. They are almost always linked to movements seeking change. They have two purposes, maybe three: 1) to expose a wrong; 2) to draw attention to the movement seeking to right that wrong, and, 3) to energize the movement's supporters. Martin Luther King, Jr. said freedom songs "invigorate the movement – they give it unity and spirit". [8]

Do any of Bob Dylan's songs meet that definition? Obviously, the answer is "Yes". As Mike Marqusee notes in *Red Pepper*, a British quarterly of politics and culture, "The protest songs that made Dylan famous and with which he continues to be associated were written in a brief period of some 20 months – from January 1962 to November 1963". [9]

Although from 1962 to 2020, Dylan released 39 studio albums, 12 "live albums", 95 singles, and numerous other recordings and soundtracks, [10], the legendary protest songs are found primarily in Dylan's first three albums – *Bob Dylan, The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan,* and *The Times They Are A-Changin'*. The songs include such classics as "The Death of Emmett Till", "Let Me Die in My Footsteps", "Blowin' in the Wind", "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall", "Only a Pawn in Their Game", "With God On Our Side", "Masters of War", "When the Ship Comes In", "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll", "Ballad of Hollis Brown", "North Country Blues" and, although it didn't appear until 1965's album *Bringing It All Back Home*, "Maggie's Farm".

If you're counting, that's eleven titles; they represent a small portion of the literally hundreds of songs Dylan has composed and performed, the complete listing of which can be found here [11] There are more, which, ranging from blues to winsome love songs to plaintive meditations on the events of the day, begins to hint at why in its ranking of the greatest songwriters of all-time (which should be called the last 75 years or the "Rhythm and Blues/Rock /Country Pop Era'), *Rolling Stone* lists Bob Dylan at #1. [12]

Let's take a look at four or five and see if they meet the protest song definition of 1) exposing a wrong; 2) drawing attention to a movement seeking to right that wrong, and, 3) energize the movement's supporters. Almost immediately we'll discover that ambiguity I hinted at by saying "Yes, No and Yes" to Dylan as a protest singer. For example, "A Hard Rain's a Gonna Fall" has almost always been described as an anti-nuclear bomb song, an off-shoot of the late-1950s *Ban the Bomb* movement, and as a specific response to the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962.

Written first as a poem, the song follows the call and response form of traditional folk ballads, in particular the Anglo-Scottish border ballad "Lord Randall" which consists of a dialog between mother and son in which the mother discovers her

son has been poisoned. Dylan used the ballad's opening two lines to begin each verse of his song:

from Lord Randall
"Oh where ha'e ye been, Lord Randall my son?
O where ha'e ye been, my handsome young man"? [13]

Suffused with powerful symbolic imagery of death and destruction raining down "with pellets of poison flooding their waters", of "a man wounded with hatred", "a white man who walked a black dog", where "a home in the valley meets the dark dirty prison", Dylan's "A Hard Rain's a Gonna Fall" sings:

from A Hard Rain's a Gonna Fall
Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?
Oh, where have you been, my darling young one?
I've stumbled on the side of twelve misty mountains
I've walked and I've crawled on six crooked highways
I've stepped in the middle of seven sad forests
I've been out in front of a dozen dead oceans
I've been ten thousand miles in the mouth of a graveyard
And it's a hard, and it's a hard, it's a hard, and it's a hard
And it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall. . .

Oh, what'll you do now, my blue-eyed son?
Oh, what'll you do now, my darling young one?

And I'll tell it and think it and speak it and breathe it
And reflect it from the mountain so all souls can see it
Then I'll stand on the ocean until I start sinkin'
But I'll know my song well before I start singin'
And it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard
It's a hard rain's a-gonna fall [14]

For those who wanted to adopt the song as a protest against the Cuban Missile Crisis, there was the problem that Dylan first performed it during a hootenanny – a folk music concert – almost a month before the Crisis. Also, the song never explicitly mentions nuclear war or the bomb; later, in an interview with Studs Terkel, Dylan disavowed the atomic rain saying "it isn't fallout rain" but about all the lies people get told. [15]

And here we first see two things. First, the chameleon Dylan adapting to the times and the people around him and Dylan the artist resisting being type-cast. It is the first glimmer of the divide that would later separate Dylan from his earliest devotees. They wanted to limit him, to reduce him to a specific issue, to a specific time and place.

Dylan was after bigger game. He wasn't a "journalist" commenting on the problems of the day, as he later accused Phil Ochs. Dylan sang about the plight of the innocent in a world beset by evil. His topic was the philosophical problem of evil. He would have been at home with the anonymous poets and scribes who wrote the ***Book of Genesis*** attempting to understand how bad things happen to good people, or, more problematically, how it is that good people do bad things. As in the genuinely anti-war song "With God On Our Side", which like much of Dylan's work, can be read narrowly – anti-war – and more broadly as a screed

against the righteous and self-righteous who use their creed to rationalize their hypocrisy and to justify themselves to themselves. First sung as a duet with Joan Baez at the Newport Folk Festival in July 1963, the song sings:

from With God On Our Side
Oh my name it is nothin'
My age it means less
The country I come from
Is called the Midwest
I's taught and brought up there
The laws to abide
And that the land that I live in
Has God on its side. . .

But now we got weapons
Of the chemical dust
If fire them we're forced to
Then fire them we must
One push of the button
And a shot the worldwide
And you never ask questions
When God's on your side. . .
Through many dark hour
I've been thinkin' about this
That Jesus Christ
Was betrayed by a kiss
But I can't think for you
You'll have to decide
Whether Judas Iscariot
Had God on his side [16]

Again, Dylan pivots from the topical to the universal exploring the ambiguity of moral judgment. Shifting topics, very early in his career Dylan sang of civil rights in a number of songs, but two merits special note. One became a classic anthem, the other a stark portrayal of Jim Crow injustice and an indictment of those who acquiesce in it. The latter is "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll", the former, of course, is "Blowin In the Wind". In "Hattie Carroll", Dylan sings of the murder of Hattie Carroll, a 51-year-old black woman tending a bar who was killed in 1963 by a 24-year-old white boy William (Billy) Zanzinger, who didn't think she served him fast enough. Hattie Carroll died from a stroke after Zanzinger hit her with his cane trying to spur her to move faster; Zanzinger was convicted of manslaughter and served six months in the county jail. Zanzinger might have done his six months, but he wasn't reformed. Years later he surfaced in a scandal about abusing poor Black people in various real estate dealings. [17] Dylan's song sings:

from The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll
In the courtroom of honor, the judge pounded his gavel
To show that all's equal and that the courts are on the level
And that the strings in the books ain't pulled and persuaded
And that even the nobles get properly handled
Once that the cops have chased after and caught 'em
And that the ladder of law has no top and no bottom
Stared at the person who killed for no reason
Who just happened to be feelin' that way without warnin'

And he spoke through his cloak, most deep and distinguished
And handed out strongly, for penalty and repentance
William Zanzinger with a six-month sentence
Oh, but you who philosophize disgrace and criticize all fears
Bury the rag deep in your face
For now's the time for your tears. [18]

Dylan's most famous civil rights song's essential question remains unanswered. In 2021, as we struggle with Black Lives Matter, a resurgent white supremacist movement supported by a former President of the United States, and a growing refusal by white people to want to understand Black history, we still don't know "how many roads", "how many years" and "how many times" will have to be traveled and gone by before we know the answer of racial justice and peace.

from Blowin' In the Wind
How many roads must a man walk down
Before you call him a man?. . .
Yes, 'n' how many years can some people exist
Before they're allowed to be free?. . .
Yes, 'n' how many times can a man turn his head
Pretending he just doesn't see?. . .
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind [19]

Dylan pursued the issue of Black rights in 1975's "Hurricane" about boxer Rubin "Hurricane" Carter who was framed by the police for a triple murder in a Paterson, New Jersey bar in 1966. Although dogged by accusations of inaccuracy, the song resonated, and Carter was ultimately freed in 1985 when a judge ruled "that the original prosecution had been 'based on racism rather than reason'". [20]

With roots firmly anchored in classic midwestern progressivism and populism, Dylan didn't only sing about war and racism. He also sang of the people among whom he grew up, voicing solidarity for worker's rights in "Maggie's Farm", on which he said "he wasn't going to work no more"; voicing solidarity with the miners of the North Country he felt abandoned by shifting economic tides, in particular, globalism which he opposed in "North Country Blues"; voicing solidarity for small, midwestern farmers struggling to survive in "The Ballad of Hollis Brown". [21]

Still, Dylan's two most resonant "protest" songs remain the eponymous 1964 "The Times They Are a-Changin" and "Masters of War". With their generational myopia, ***Rolling Stone's*** *Reader's Poll* ranked "Masters of War" #1 on its *Top Ten Protest Songs of All Time.* It was one of four Dylan songs on the list, the other three being "Hurricane", "Blowin' in the Wind" and "The Times They Are a-Changin'". [22]

Written in 1962 or 1963, "Masters of War" took its melody from the early American folk tune "Nottamun Town", which unknown to Dylan had been part of veteran folk singer Jean Ritchie's family's repertoire of songs for generations. Dylan later paid Ritchie a settlement for use of the melody. [23] It is one of Dylan's most explicitly condemnatory songs, in which he gives the "Masters" who'd kill us all in their pursuit of personal gain no quarter. They are all to be condemned. The song was picked up as an anti-Vietnam war screed, when, in fact, it predates America's large-scale involvement in Vietnam by several years. It was actually inspired by President Eisenhower's farewell address in which he warned against the military-

industrial complex. As Dylan said in a 2001 interview with USA TODAY's Edna Gundersen, intellectuals and others say "Masters of War" "is supposed to be a pacifistic song against war. It's not an anti-war song. It's speaking against what Eisenhower was calling the military industrial complex. . . that spirit was in the air, and I picked it up". [24] It sings:

from Masters of War
Come you masters of war
You that build the big guns
You that build the death planes
You that build all the bombs
You that hide behind walls
You that hide behind desks
I just want you to know
I can see through your masks. . .

You fasten all the triggers
For the others to fire
Then you sit back and watch
When the death count gets higher
You hide in your mansion
While the young people's blood
Flows out of their bodies
And is buried in the mud [25]

Covered by a proverbial laundry list of singers ranging from Nina Simone to Burl Ives, ranked #59 on *Rolling Stone's* list of 500 greatest songs of all time, [26], in "The Times They Are a-Changin'" Dylan explicitly set out to write an anthem for the times. In doing so, it became the anthem of the counterculture and earned him the title "voice of a generation", which he later, in fact, almost immediately, rejected.

from The Times They Are a-Changin'
Come gather 'round people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters
Around you have grown
And accept it that soon
You'll be drenched to the bone
If your time to you is worth savin'
Then you better start swimmin' or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'. . .
Come mothers and fathers
Throughout the land
And don't criticize
What you can't understand
Your sons and your daughters
Are beyond your command
Your old road is rapidly agin'
Please get out of the new one if you can't lend your hand
For the times they are a-changin' [27]

Well, one can hardly argue whether or not the times have indeed changed this past now almost sixty years, but it remains to be seen if they changed in quite the

way Dylan or his followers imagined. While the players' complexions and genders have altered, the behavior of those in power, whether economic or political, seems eerily similar to those whom Dylan challenged. An analysis of which would lead us into a moral thicket of questions about the perfectibility of human nature and the presence of evil in human society. Is the world a safer, saner, more egalitarian place than it was in 1961, or as much on the surface changed while leaving the core untouched? It would lead us back to "A Hard Rains A Gonna Fall", the problem of evil, and the larger question of whether or not human moral progress is possible.

We'll come back to those questions in future *Book Notes* exploring the entire corpus of Dylan's work, but one thing that happened almost immediately after "The Times They Are a-Changin's" appearance was Dylan's renunciation of being labeled a protest singer and the voice of a generation. As his comments forty years later in the Gundersen interview suggest, Dylan quite early felt he was being both misheard and limited by listeners and critics labeling him. He might have originally entered into the folk music milieu and protest genre because it appealed to his progressive instincts and also seemed like a good career move. The folk movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s had a brief stay at the top of the pop charts and Dylan, who, among the many things he is, is a careerist. Thinking he saw an opportunity meshing with his innate interests, he seized it.

As Dylan told Nat Hentoff in a seminal 1964 ***New Yorker*** article, *"The Crackin', Shakin', Breakin' Sounds",* he quickly saw its limitations. In the article, based on an interview with Hentoff during the recording session for Dylan's fourth album, ***Another Side of Bob Dylan,*** Dylan told Hentoff, "There aren't any finger-pointing songs in here. . .Those records I've already made, I'll stand behind them, but some of that was jumping into the scene to be heard and a lot of it was because I didn't see anybody else doing that kind of thing. Now a lot of people are doing finger-pointing songs. You know—pointing to all the things that are wrong. Me, I don't want to write *for* people anymore. You know—be a spokesman. . . From now on, I want to write from inside me. . ." [28]

When Hentoff pointed out to Tom Wilson, Dylan's recording engineer and producer, that there were no protest songs in the set they were recording that night, Wilson replied, "Those early albums gave people the wrong idea," Wilson said. "Basically, he's in the tradition of all lasting folk music. I mean, he's not a singer of protest so much as he is **a singer of *concern* about people.**" (Emphasis Added) [29] That may be the most important point. Dylan sings about people; all of his songs are about people and, at the risk of a pretentious turn of phrase, the human condition.

Dylan didn't want to be straight-jacketed within a genre. He wanted to grow; he wanted to explore what it was he had inside himself to become. To do that, he had to move on; he had to leave the narrow, albeit it is rich, in all senses of the word, folk-protest genre in which he had begun in order to discover what he had within himself to be. He's been doing that for sixty years; while those he started with have faded, his 1997 album ***Time Out of Mind*** won, in addition to two others, the Grammy for album of the year. In June 2020, his 39th studio album, ***Rough and Rowdy Ways*** was released to critical praise. [30]

All those years ago two songs in ***Another Side of Bob Dylan*** hinted at his farewell to overt protest music and pointed in the direction he was headed – "It Ain't Me Babe" and "My Back Pages". Although it appears to be a song about a jilted lover

or a lover jilting a lover, many observers “read” “It Ain’t Me Babe” as Dylan rejecting being slotted as the herald of a generation telling his followers “It ain’t me you’re looking for. . .” The song sings:

from It Ain’t Me Babe
Go ’way from my window
Leave at your own chosen speed
I’m not the one you want, babe
I’m not the one you need
You say you’re lookin’ for someone
Never weak but always strong
To protect you an’ defend you
Whether you are right or wrong
Someone to open each and every door
But it ain’t me, babe
No, no, no, it ain’t me, babe
It ain’t me you’re lookin’ for, babe

You say you’re lookin' for someone
Who’ll pick you up each time you fall
To gather flowers constantly
An’ to come each time you call
A lover for your life an’ nothing more
But it ain’t me, babe
No, no, no, it ain’t me, babe
It ain’t me you’re lookin’ for, babe [31]

Less metaphorical, more direct is “My Back Pages” in which Dylan seems to criticize his earlier music’s own self-seriousness. Noting that he was too naïve to realize he’d become “my enemy/In the instant that I preach”, that he’d become “a self-ordained professor. . .too serious to fool”, he implicitly vows to move past that for, in a powerful inversion, he rejects the faux maturity of assumed enlightenment for a youthful openness to experience – “. . .I was so much older then/I’m younger than that now”.

from My Back Pages
Crimson flames tied through my ears
Rollin’ high and mighty traps
Pounced with fire on flaming roads
Using ideas as my maps
“We’ll meet on edges, soon,” said I
Proud ’neath heated brow
Ah, but I was so much older then
I’m younger than that now

A self-ordained professor’s tongue
Too serious to fool
Spouted out that liberty
Is just equality in school. . .
In a soldier’s stance, I aimed my hand
At the mongrel dogs who teach
Fearing not that I’d become my enemy
In the instant that I preach. . .
Ah, but I was so much older then

I'm younger than that now [32]

So, was/is Bob Dylan a protest singer? ***Yes, No,*** and ***Yes***.

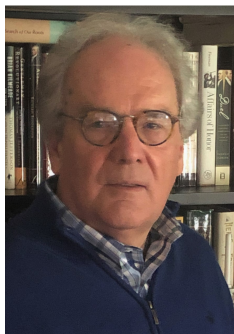
Yes, in his original incarnation as a young man who wanted to be a singer, he seized folk's brief pop moment, fused his midwestern progressive roots favoring the downtrodden and those who work the soil with his admiration for Woody Guthrie, and became the child (he was scarcely 22 when he first became famous) prodigy star of early-1960s anti-bomb, pro-civil rights folk music.

And also, ***No*** as he instinctively sensed that this was a reductionist trap. Avoiding the trap both overtly in interviews and metaphorically in songs such as "All I Really Want to Do", "It Ain't Me Babe", "Maggie's Farm", "My Back Pages" and "Chimes of Freedom" he rejected the limiting role and pointed where he was going. Which he then made explicit in his next three albums, 1965's ***Bringing It All Back Home*** and ***Highway 61 Revisited***, which opened with "Like a Rolling Stone" later listed #1 on **Rolling Stone** magazine's list of "The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time" [33] and 1966's double-album ***Blonde on Blonde***.

And, then, ***Yes*** again as the body of his work these past 50+ years has validated Tom Wilson's observation in that long-ago recording session for **Another Side of Bob Dylan** – his songs share a concern for people. He is concerned for people. At the end of the day, Dylan is a humanist – not a humanitarian, not a do-gooder, but a humanist in the best sense of the word. He is concerned about humans; he is concerned about people. He has spent his life singing that concern in some of the most memorable songs of the century – "Mr. Tambourine Man", "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue", "Shelter from the Storm", "Just Like a Woman", "I Want You", "Farewell, Angelina", "John Wesley Harding", "Things Have Changed", which won an Academy Award for Best Song in 2001, 2020's **Rough and Rowdy Ways'** "I Contain Multitudes", in which Dylan channeled Walt Whitman, and literally dozens more.

At 80, he's still out there singing his concern for people. So ***yes, no*** and ***yes***, he's a protest singer but he is also so much more, for 'he's younger than that now.

Rather than just reading the names of songs, for a more complete experience of these songs listen to Episodes #13 and #14: *"Songs of Protest Seeking Freedom"* of my ***The American Tapestry Project*** on WQLN/NPR which can be found on WQLN's website here, and on NPR One here.



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1. Joan Baez and a young Bob Dylan at **Wikicommons** available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Joan_Baez_and_Bob_Dylan.jpg accessed September 1,

2021;
2. President Barack Obama presents American musician Bob Dylan with a Medal of Freedom at **Wikicommons** available here. accessed September 1, 2021.

End Notes

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6. Cf. Thomas, Richard F. ***Why Bob Dylan Matters.*** (New York: Dey Street Press, an imprint of William Morrow, 2017).
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