

INTERVIEWS FROM THE 90's



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THE SONG TALK INTERVIEW, 1991

Bob Dylan: The Song Talk Interview.

By: Paul Zollo

Date: 1991

Transcribed from GBS #3 booklet

"I've made shoes for everyone, even you, while I still go barefoot"
from "I and I" By Bob Dylan

Songwriting? What do I know about songwriting? Bob Dylan asked, and then broke into laughter. He was wearing blue jeans and a white tank-top T-shirt, and drinking coffee out of a glass. "It tastes better out of a glass," he said grinning. His blonde acoustic guitar was leaning on a couch near where we sat. Bob Dylan's guitar . His influence is so vast that everything that surrounds takes on enlarged significance: Bob Dylan's moccasins. Bob Dylan's coat .

*"And the ghost of 'lectricity howls in the bones of her face
Where these visions of Johanna have now taken my place.
The harmonicas play the skeleton keys and the rain
And these visions of Johanna are now all that remain"* from
"Visions of Johanna"

Pete Seeger said, "All songwriters are links in a chain," yet there are few artists in this evolutionary arc whose influence is as profound as that of Bob Dylan. It's hard to imagine the art of songwriting as we know it without him. Though he insists in this interview that "somebody else would have done it," he was the instigator, the one who knew that songs could do more , that they could take on more. He knew that songs could contain a lyrical richness and meaning far beyond the scope of all previous pop songs, and they could possess as much beauty and power as the greatest poetry, and that by being written in rhythm and rhyme and merged with music, they could speak to our souls.

Starting with the models made by his predecessors, such as the talking blues, Dylan quickly discarded old forms and began to fashion new ones. He broke all the rules of songwriting without abandoning the craft and care that holds songs together. He brought the linguistic beauty of Shakespeare, Byron, and Dylan Thomas, and the expansiveness and beat experimentation of Ginsberg, Kerouac and Ferlinghetti, to the folk poetry of Woody Guthrie and Hank Williams. And when the world was still in the midst of accepting this new form, he brought music to a new place again, fusing it with the electricity of rock and roll. "Basically, he showed that anything goes," Robbie Robertson said. John

Lennon said that it was hearing Dylan that allowed him to make the leap from writing empty pop songs to expressing the actuality of his life and the depths of his own soul. "Help" was a real call for help, he said, and prior to hearing Dylan it didn't occur to him that songs could contain such direct meaning. When he asked Paul Simon how he made the leap in his writing from fifties rock & roll songs like "Hey Schoolgirl" to writing "Sound of Silence" he said, "I really can't imagine it could have been anyone else besides Bob Dylan."

*"Yes, to dance beneath the diamond sky
with one hand waving free,
silhouetted by the sea,
circled by the circus sands,
With all memory and fate
driven deep beneath the waves,
Let me forget about today until tomorrow."* from "Mr. Tambourine Man"

There's an unmistakable elegance in Dylan's words, an almost biblical beauty that he has sustained in his songs throughout the years. He refers to it as a "gallantry" in the following, and pointed to it as the single thing that sets his songs apart from others. Though he's maybe more famous for the freedom and expansiveness of his lyrics, all of his songs possess this exquisite care and love for the language. As Shakespeare and Byron did in their times, Dylan has taken English, perhaps the world's plainest language, and instilled it with a timeless, mythic grace.

*"Ring them bells, sweet Martha, for the poor man's son
Ring them bells so the world will know that God is one
Oh, the shepherd is asleep
where the willows weep
and the mountains are filled with lost sheep"* from "Ring Them Bells"

As much as he has stretched, expanded and redefined the rules of songwriting, Dylan is a tremendously meticulous craftsman. A brutal critic of his own work, he works and reworks the words of his songs in the studio and even continues to rewrite certain ones even after they've been recorded and released. "They're not written in stone," he said. With such a wondrous wealth of language at his fingertips, he discards imagery and lines other songwriters would sell their souls to discover. The Bootleg Series , a recently released collection of previously unissued recordings, offers a rare opportunity to see the revisions and regrouping his songs go through. "Idiot Wind" is one of his angriest songs ("You don't hear a song like that every day," he said), which he recorded

on *Blood On The Tracks* in a way that reflects this anger, emphasizing lines of condemnation like "one day you'll be in the ditch, flies buzzin' around your eyes, blood on your saddle." On *The Bootleg Series*, we get an alternate approach to the song, a quiet, tender reading of the same lines that makes the inherent disquiet of the song even more disturbing, the tenderness of Dylan's delivery adding a new level of genuine sadness to lines like "people see me all the time and they just can't remember how to act." The peak moment of the song is the penultimate chorus when Dylan addresses America: "Idiot wind, blowing like a circle around my skull, from the Grand Coulee Dam to the Capitol." On the *Bootleg* version, this famous line is still in formation: "Idiot wind, blowing every time you move your jaw, from the Grand Coulee Dam to the Mardi Gras." His song "Jokerman" also went through a similar evolution, as a still unreleased bootleg of the song reveals. Like "Idiot Wind," the depth and intensity of the lyric is sustained over an extraordinary amount of verses, yet even more scenes were shot that wound up on the cutting room floor, evidence of an artist overflowing with the abundance of creation:

*"It's a shadowy world
skies are slippery gray
A woman just gave birth to a prince today
and dressed him in scarlet
He'll put the priest in his pocket,
put the blade to the heat
Take the motherless children off the street
And place them at the feet of a harlot"* from "Jokerman" on *Infidels*
*"It's a shadowy world
skies are slippery gray
A woman just gave birth to a prince today
and she's dressed in scarlet
He'll turn priests into pimps
and make all men bark
Take a woman who could have been Joan of Arc
and turn her into a harlot"* from "Jokerman" on *Outfidents*, a bootleg

Often Dylan lays abstraction aside and writes songs as clear and telling as any of Woody Guthrie's narrative ballads, finding heroes and antiheroes in our modern times as Woody found in his. Some of these subjects might be thought of as questionable choices for heroic treatment, such as underworld boss Joey Gallo, about whom he wrote the astounding song, "Joey." It's a song that is remarkable for its cinematic clarity; Dylan paints a picture of a life and death so explicit and exact that we can see every frame of it, and even experience Gallo's death as if we were sitting there watching it. And he does it with a rhyme scheme and a meter that makes the immediacy of the imagery even more striking:

*"One day they blew him down
in a clam bar in New York
He could see it coming through the door
as he lifted up his fork.
He pushed the table over to protect his family
Then he staggered out into the streets
of Little Italy." from "Joey"*

"Yes, well, what can you know about anybody?" Dylan asked, and it's a good question. He's been a mystery for years, "kind of impenetrable, really," Paul Simon said, and that mystery is not penetrated by this interview or any interview. Dylan's answers are often more enigmatic than the questions themselves, and like his songs, they give you a lot to think about while not necessarily, revealing much about the man. In person, as others have noted, he is Chaplinesque. His body is smaller and his head bigger than one might expect, giving the effect of a kid wearing a Bob Dylan mask. He possesses one of the world's most striking faces; while certain stars might seem surprisingly normal and unimpressive in the flesh, Dylan is perhaps even more startling to confront than one might expect. Seeing those eyes, and that nose, it's clear it could be no one else than he, and to sit at a table with him and face those iconic features is no less impressive than suddenly finding yourself sitting face to face with William Shakespeare. It's a face we associate with an enormous, amazing body of work, work that has changed the world. But it's not really the kind of face one expects to encounter in everyday life.

Though Van Morrison and others have called him the world's greatest poet, he doesn't think of himself as a poet. "Poets drown in lakes," he said to us. Yet he's written some of the most beautiful poetry the world has known, poetry of love and outrage, of abstraction and clarity, of timelessness and relativity. Though he is faced with the evidence of a catalogue of songs that would contain the whole careers of a dozen fine songwriters, Dylan told us he doesn't consider himself to be a professional songwriter. "For me it's always been more con -fessional than pro -fessional," he said in distinctive Dylan cadence. "My songs aren't written on a schedule." Well, how are they written, we asked? This is the question at the heart of this interview, the main one that comes to mind when looking over all the albums, or witnessing the amazing array of moods, masks, styles and forms all represented on the recently released Bootleg Series-. How has he done it? It was the first question asked, and though he deflected it at first with his customary humor, it's a question we returned to a few times. "Start me off somewhere," he said smiling, as if he might be left alone to divulge the secrets of his songwriting, and out talk began.

SongTalk: Okay, Arlo Guthrie recently said, "Songwriting is like fishing in a stream; you put in your line and hope you catch something. And I don't think anyone downstream from Bob Dylan ever caught anything."

Dylan:[Much laughter]

ST: Any idea how you've been able to catch so many?

Dylan:[Laughs] It's probably the bait.[More laughter]

ST: What kind of bait do you use?

Dylan: Uh... bait... You've got to use some bait. Otherwise you sit around and expect songs to come to you. Forcing it is using bait.

ST: Does that work for you?

Dylan: Well, no. Throwing yourself into into a situation that would demand a response is like using bait. People who write about stuff that hasn't really happened to them are inclined to do that.

ST: When you write songs, do you try to consciously guide the meaning or do you try to follow subconscious directions?

Dylan: Well, you know, motivation is something you never know behind any song, really. Anybody's song, you never know what the motivation was. It's nice to be able to put yourself in an environment where you can completely accept all the unconscious stuff that comes to you from your inner workings of your mind. And block yourself off to where you can control it all, take it down. Edgar Allan Poe must have done that. People who are dedicated writers, of which there are some , but mostly people get their information today over a television set or some kind of a way that's hitting them on all their senses. It's not just a great novel anymore. You have to be able to get the thoughts out of your mind.

ST: How do you do that?

Dylan: Well, first of all, there's two kinds of thoughts in your mind: there's good thoughts and evil thoughts. Both come through your mind. Some people are more loaded down with one than another. Nevertheless, they come through. And you have to be able to sort them out, if you want to be a songwriter, if you want to be a good song singer. You must get rid of all that baggage. You ought to be able to sort out those thoughts, because they don't mean anything, they're just pulling you around, too. It's important to get

rid of all them thoughts. Then you can do something from some kind of surveillance of the situation. You have some kind of place where you can see but it can't affect you. Where you can bring something to the matter, besides just take, take, take, take, take. As so many situations in life are today. Take, take, take, that's all that it is. What's in it for me? That syndrome which started in the Me Decade, whenever that was. We're still in that. It's still happening.

ST: Is songwriting for you more a sense of taking something from some place else?

Dylan: Well, someplace else is always a heartbeat away. There's no rhyme or reason to it. There's no rule. That's what makes it so attractive . There isn't any rule. You can still have your wits about you and do something that gets you off in a multitude of ways. As you very well know, or else you yourself wouldn't be doing it.

ST: Your songs often bring us back to other times, and are filled with mythic, magical images. A song like "Changing Of The Guard" seems to take place centuries ago, with lines like "They shaved her head/she was torn between Jupiter and Apollo/a messenger arrived with a black nightingale...". How do you connect with a song like that?

Dylan:[Pause] A song like that, there's no way of knowing, after the fact, unless somebody's there to take it down in chronological order, what the motivation was behind it. [Pause] But on one level, of course, it's no different from anything else of mine. It's the same amount of metric verses like a poem. To me, like a poem. The melodies in my mind are very simple, they're very simple, they're just based on music we've all heard growing up. And that and music which went beyond that, which went back further, Elizabethan ballads and whatnot... To me, it's old. [Laughs] It's old. It's not something, with my minimal amount of talent, if you could call it that, minimum amount... To me somebody coming along now would definitely read what's out there if they're seriously concerned with being an artist who's going to still be an artist when they get to be Picasso's age. You're better off learning some music theory. You're just better off, yeah, if you want to write songs. Rather than just take a hillbilly twang, you know, and try to base it all on that. Even country music is more orchestrated than it used to be. You're better off having some feel for music that you don't have to carry in your head, that you can write down. To me those are the people who... are serious about this craft. People who go about it that way. Not people who just want to pour out their insides and they got to get a big idea out and they want to tell the world about this , sure, you can do it through a

song, you always could. You can use a song for anything, you know. The world don't need any more songs.

ST: You don't think so?

Dylan: No. They've got enough. They've got way too many. As a matter of fact, if nobody wrote any songs from this day on, the world ain't gonna suffer for it. Nobody cares. There's enough songs for people to listen to, if they want to listen to songs. For every man, woman and child on earth, they could be sent, probably, each of them, a hundred records, and never be repeated. There's enough songs. Unless someone's gonna come along with a pure heart and has something to say. That's a different story. But as far as songwriting, any idiot could do it. If you see me do it, any idiot could do it. [Laughs] It's just not that difficult of a thing. Everybody writes a song just like everybody's got that one great novel in them. There aren't a lot of people like me. You just had your interview with Neil [Young], John Mellencamp... Of course, most of my ilk that came along write their own songs and play them. It wouldn't matter if anybody ever made another record. They've got enough songs. To me, someone who writes really good songs is Randy Newman. There's a lot of people who write good songs. As songs. Now Randy might not go out on stage and knock you out, or knock your socks off. And he's not going to get people thrilled in the front row. He ain't gonna do that. But he's gonna write a better song than most people who can do it. You know, he's got that down to an art. Now Randy knows music. He knows music But it doesn't get any better than "Louisiana" or "Cross Charleston Bay" ["Sail Away"]. It doesn't get any better than that. It's like a classically heroic anthem theme. He did it. There's quite a few people who did it. Not that many people in Randy's class. Brian Wilson. He can write melodies that will beat the band. Three people could combine on a song and make it a great song. If one person would have written the same song, maybe you would have never heard it. It might get buried on some... rap record. [Laughs]

ST: Still, when you've come out with some of your new albums of songs, those songs fit that specific time better than any songs that had already been written. Your new songs have always shown us new possibilities.

Dylan: It's not a good idea and it's bad luck to look for life's guidance to popular entertainers. It's bad luck to do that. No one should do that. Popular entertainers are fine, there's nothing the matter with that but as long as you know where you're standing and what ground you're on, many of them, they don't know what they're doing either.

ST: But your songs are more than pop entertainment...

Dylan: Some people say so. Not to me.

ST: No?

Dylan: Pop entertainment means nothing to me. Nothing. You know, Madonna's good. Madonna's good, she's talented, she puts all kind of stuff together, she's learned her thing... But it's the kind of thing which takes years and years out of your life to be able to do. You've got to sacrifice a whole lot to do that. Sacrifice. If you want to make it big, you've got to sacrifice a whole lot. It's all the same, it's all the same. [Laughs]

ST: Van Morrison said that you are our greatest living poet. Do you think of yourself in those terms?

Dylan: [Pause] Sometimes. It's within me. It's within me to put myself up and be a poet. But it's a dedication. [Softly] It's a big dedication. [Pause] Poets don't drive cars. [Laughs] Poets don't go to the supermarket. Poets don't empty the garbage. Poets aren't on the PTA. Poets, you know, they don't go picket the Better Housing Bureau, or whatever. Poets don't... Poets don't even speak on the telephone. Poets don't even talk to anybody. Poets do a lot of listening and... and usually they know why they're poets! [Laughs] Yeah, there are... what can you say? The world don't need any more poems, it's got Shakespeare. There's enough of everything. You name it, there's enough of it. There was too much of it with electricity, maybe, some people said that. Some people said lightbulb was going too far. Poets live on the land. They behave in a gentlemanly way. And live by their own gentlemanly code. [Pause] And die broke. Or drown in lakes. Poets usually have very unhappy endings. Look at Keats' life. Look at Jim Morrison, if you want to call him a poet. Look at him. Although some people say that he is really in the Andes.

ST: Do you think so?

Dylan: Well, it never crossed my mind to think one way or the other about it, but you do hear that talk. Piggyback in the Andes. Riding a donkey.

ST: People have a hard time believing that Shakespeare really wrote all of his work because there is so much of it. Do you have a hard time accepting that?

Dylan: People have a hard time accepting anything that overwhelms them.

ST: Might they think that of you, years from now, that no one man could have produced so much incredible work?

Dylan: They could. They could look back and think nobody produced it. [Softly] It's not to anybody's best interest to think about how they will be perceived tomorrow. It hurts you in the long run.

ST: But aren't there songs of your own that you know will always be around?

Dylan: Who's gonna sing them? My songs really aren't meant to be covered. No, not really. Can you think of... Well, they do get covered, but it's covered. They're not intentionally written to be covered, but okay, they do.

ST: Your songs are much more enjoyable to sing and play than most songs...

Dylan: Do you play them on piano or guitar?

ST: Both.

Dylan: Acoustic guitar?

ST: Mostly.

Dylan: Do you play jazz? It never hurts to learn as many chords as you can. All kinds. Sometime it will change the inflection of a whole song, a straight chord, or, say, an augmented seventh chord.

ST: Do you have favorite keys to work in?

Dylan: On the piano, my favorite keys are the black keys. And they sound better on guitar, too. Sometimes when a song's in a flat key, say B flat, bring it to the guitar, you might want to put it in A. But... that's an interesting thing you just said. It changes the reflection. Mainly in mine the songs sound different. They sound... when you take a black key song and put it on the guitar, which means you're playing in A flat, not too many people like to play in those keys. To me it doesn't matter. [Laughs] It doesn't matter because my fingering is the same anyway. So there are songs that, even without the piano, which is the dominant sound if you're playing in the black keys -- why else would you play in that key except to have that dominant piano sound? -- the songs that go into those keys right from the piano, they sound different. They sound deeper. Yeah. They sound deeper. Everything sounds deeper in those black keys. They're not guitar keys, though. Guitar

bands don't usually like to play in those keys, which kind of gives me an idea, actually, of a couple of songs that could actually sound better in black keys.

ST: Do keys have different colors for you?

Dylan: Sure. Sure. [Softly] Sure.

ST: You've written some great A minor songs. I think of "One More Cup Of Coffee" --

Dylan: Right. B minor might sound even better.

ST: How come?

Dylan: Well, it might sound better because you're playing a lot of open chords if you're playing in A minor. If you play in B minor, it will force you to play higher. And the chords... you're bound, someplace along the line, because there are so many chords in that song, or seem to be anyway, you're bound someplace along the line to come down to an open chord on the bottom. From B. You would hit E someplace along the line. Try it in B minor. [Laughs] Maybe it will be a hit for you. A hit is a number one song, isn't it? Yeah.

ST: When you sit down to write a song, do you pick a key first that will fit a song? Or do you change keys while you're writing?

Dylan: Yeah. Yeah. Maybe like in the middle of the thing. There are ways you can get out of whatever you've gotten into. You want to get out of it. It's bad enough getting into it. But the thing to do as soon as you get into it is realize you must get out of it. And unless you get out of it quickly and effortlessly, there's no use staying in it. It will just drag you down. You could be spending years writing the same song, telling the same story, doing the same thing. So once you involve yourself in it, once you accidentally have slipped into it, the thing is to get out. So your primary impulse is going to take you so far. But then you might think, well, you know, is this one of these things where it's all just going to come? And then all of the sudden you start thinking. And when my mind starts thinking, "What's happening now? Oh, there's a story here," and my mind starts to get into it, that's trouble right away. That's usually big trouble. And as far as never seeing this thing again. There's a bunch of ways you can get out of that. You can make yourself get out of it by changing key. That's one way. Just take the whole thing and change key, keeping the same melody. And see if that brings you any place. More times than not, that will take you down the road. You don't want to be on a collision course.

But that will take you down the road. Somewhere. And then if that fails, and that will run out, too, then you can always go back to where you were to start. It won't work twice, it only works once. Then you go back to where you started. Yeah, because anything you do in A, it's going to be a different song in G. While you're writing it, anyway. There's too many wide passing notes in G [on the guitar] not to influence your writing, unless you're playing barre chords.

ST: Do you ever switch instruments, like from guitar to piano, while writing?

Dylan: Not so much that way. Although when it's time to record something, for me, sometimes a song that has been written on piano with just lyrics here in my hand, it'll be time to play it now on guitar. So it will come out differently. But it wouldn't have influenced the writing of the song at all. Changing keys influences the writing of the song. Changing keys on the same instrument. For me, that works. I think for somebody else, the other thing works. Everything is different.

ST: I interviewed Pete Seeger recently --

Dylan: He's a great man, Pete Seeger.

ST: I agree. He said, "All songwriters are links in a chain." Without your link in that chain, all of songwriting would have evolved much differently. You said how you brought folk music to rock music. Do you think that would have happened without you?

Dylan: Somebody else would have done it in some other kind of way. But, hey, so what? So what? You can lead people astray awfully easily. Would people have been better off? Sure. They would have found somebody else. Maybe different people would have found different people, and would have been influenced by different people.

ST: You brought the song to a new place. Is there still a new place to bring songs? Will they continue to evolve?

Dylan: [Pause] The evolution of song is like a snake with its tail in its mouth. That's evolution. That's what it is. As soon as you're there, you find your tail.

ST: Would it be okay with you if I mentioned some lines from your songs out of context to see what response you might have to them?

Dylan: Sure. You can name anything you want to name, man.

ST: "I stand here looking at your yellow railroad/in the ruins of your balcony... [from "Absolutely Sweet Marie"]

Dylan: [Pause] Okay. That's an old song. No, let's say not even old. How old? Too old. It's matured well. It's like wine. Now, you know, look, that's as complete as you can be. Every single letter in that line. It's all true. On a literal and on an escapist level.

ST: And is it truth that adds so much resonance to it?

Dylan: Oh yeah, exactly. See, you can pull it apart and it's like, "Yellow railroad?" Well, yeah. Yeah, yeah. All of it.

ST: "I was lying down in the reeds without any oxygen/I saw you in the wilderness among the men/I saw you drift into infinity and come back again..." [from "True Love Tends To Forget"].

Dylan: Those are probably lyrics left over from my songwriting days with Jacques Levy. To me, that's what they sound like. Getting back to the yellow railroad, that could be from looking some place. Being a performer you travel the world. You're not just looking off the same window everyday. You're not just walking down the same old street. So you must make yourself observe whatever. But most of the time it hits you. You don't have to observe. It hits you. Like "yellow railroad" could have been a blinding day when the sun was bright on a railroad someplace and it stayed on my mind. These aren't contrived images. These are images which are just in there and have got to come out. You know, if it's in there it's got to come out.

ST: "And the chains of the sea will be busted in the night..." [from "When The Ship Comes In"].

Dylan: To me, that song says a whole lot. Patti Labelle should do that . You know? You know, there again, that comes from hanging out at a lot of poetry gatherings. Those kind of images are very romantic. They're very gothic and romantic at the same time. And they have a sweetness to it, also. So it's a combination of a lot of different elements at the time. That's not a contrived line. That's not sitting down and writing a song. Those kind of songs, they just come out. They're in you so they've got to come out.

ST: "Standing on the water casting your bread/while the eyes of the idol with the iron head are glowing..." [from "Jokerman"].

Dylan: [Blows small Peruvian flute] Which one is that again?

ST: That's from "Jokerman."

Dylan: That's a song that got away from me. Lots of songs on that album [Infidels] got away from me. They just did.

ST: You mean in the writing?

Dylan: Yeah. They hung around too long. They were better before they were tampered with. Of course, it was me tampering with them. [Laughs] Yeah. That could have been a good song. It could've been.

ST: I think it's tremendous.

Dylan: Oh, you do? It probably didn't hold up for me because in my mind it had been written and rewritten and written again. One of those kinds of things.

ST: "But the enemy I see wears a cloak of decency..." [from "Slow Train"].

Dylan: Now don't tell me... wait... Is that "When You Gonna Wake Up"?

ST: No, that's from "Slow Train."

Dylan: Oh, wow. Oh, yeah. Wow. There again. That's a song that you could write a song to every line in the song. You could.

ST: Many of your songs are like that.

Dylan: Well, you know, that's not good either. Not really. In the long run, it could have stood up better by maybe doing just that, maybe taking every line and making a song out of it. If somebody had the will power. But that line, there again, is an intellectual line. It's a line, "Well, the enemy I see wears a cloak of decency," that could be a lie. It just could be. Whereas "Standing under your yellow railroad," that's not a lie. To Woody Guthrie, see, the airwaves were sacred. And when he'd hear something false, it was on airwaves that were sacred to him. His songs weren't false. Now we know the airwaves aren't sacred but to him they were. So that influenced a lot of people with me coming up. Like, "You know, all those songs on the Hit Parade are just a bunch of shit, anyway." It influenced me in the beginning when nobody had heard that. Nobody had heard that. You know, "If I give my heart to you, will you handle it with care?" Or "I'm getting sentimental over you." Who gives a shit! It could be said in a grand way, and the performer could put the song across, but come on, that's

because he's a great performer not because it's a great song. Woody was also a performer and songwriter. So a lot of us got caught up in that. There ain't anything good on the radio. It doesn't happen. Then, of course, the Beatles came along and kind of grabbed everybody by the throat. You were for them or against them. You were for them or you joined them, or whatever. Then everybody said, Oh, popular song ain't so bad, and then everyone wanted to get on the radio. [Laughs] Before that it didn't matter. My first records were never played on the radio. It was unheard of! Folk records weren't played on the radio. You never heard them on the radio and nobody cared if they were on the radio. Going on into it further, after the Beatles came out and everybody from England, Rock and Roll still is an American thing. Folk music is not. Rock and roll is an American thing, it's just all kind of twisted. But the English kind of threw it back, didn't they? And they made everybody respect it once more. So everybody wanted to get on the radio. Now nobody even knows what radio is anymore. Nobody likes it that you talk to. Nobody listens to it. But, then again, it's bigger than it ever was. But nobody knows how to really respond to it. Nobody can shut it off. [Laughs] You know? And people really aren't sure whether they want to be on the radio or whether they don't want to be on the radio. They might want to sell a lot of records, but people always did that. But being a folk performer, having hits, it wasn't important. Whatever that has to do with anything... [Laughs]

ST: Your songs, like Woody's, always have defied being pop entertainment. In your songs, like his, we know a real person is talking, with lines like "You've got a lot of nerve to say you are my friend."

Dylan: That's another way of writing a song, of course. Just talking to somebody that ain't there. That's the best way. That's the truest way. Then it just becomes a question of how heroic your speech is. To me, it's something to strive after.

ST: Until you record a song, no matter how heroic it is, it doesn't really exist. Do you ever feel that?

Dylan: No. If it's there, it exists.

ST: You once said that you only write about what's true, what's been proven to you, that you write about dreams but not fantasies.

Dylan: My songs really aren't dreams. They're more of a responsive nature. Waking up from a dream is... when you write a

dream, it's something you try to recollect and you're never quite sure if you're getting it right or not.

ST: You said your songs are responsive. Does life have to be in turmoil for songs to come?

Dylan: Well, to me, when you need them, they appear. Your life doesn't have to be in turmoil to write a song like that but you need to be outside of it. That's why a lot of people, me myself included, write songs when one form or another of society has rejected you. So that you can truly write about it from the outside. Someone who's never been out there can only imagine it as anything, really.

ST: Outside of life itself?

Dylan: No. Outside of the situation you find yourself in. There are different types of songs and they're all called songs. But there are different types of songs just like there are different types of people, you know? There's an infinite amount of different kinds, stemming from a common folk ballad verse to people who have classical training. And with classical training, of course, then you can just apply lyrics to classical training and get things going on in positions where you've never been in before. Modern twentieth century ears are the first ears to hear these kind of Broadway songs. There wasn't anything like this. These are musical songs. These are done by people who know music first. And then lyrics. To me, Hank Williams is still the best songwriter.

ST: Hank? Better than Woody Guthrie?

Dylan: That's a good question. Hank Williams never wrote "This Land Is Your Land." But it's not that shocking for me to think of Hank Williams singing "Pastures of Plenty" or Woody Guthrie singing "Cheatin' Heart." So in a lot of ways those two writers are similar. As writers. But you mustn't forget that both of these people were performers, too. And that's another thing which separates a person who just writes a song... People who don't perform but who are so locked into other people who do that, they can sort of feel what that other person would like to say, in a song and be able to write those lyrics. Which is a different thing from a performer who needs a song to play on stage year after year.

ST: And you always wrote your songs for yourself to sing --

Dylan: My songs were written with me in mind. In those situations, several people might say, "Do you have a song laying around?" The best songs to me -- my best songs -- are songs which were

written very quickly. Yeah, very, very quickly. Just about as much time as it takes to write it down is about as long as it takes to write it. Other than that, there have been a lot of ones that haven't made it. They haven't survived. They could . They need to be dragged out, you know, and looked at again, maybe.

ST: You said once that the saddest thing about songwriting is trying to reconnect with an idea you started before, and how hard that is to do.

Dylan: To me it can't be done. To me, unless I have another writer around who might want to finish it... outside of writing with the Traveling Wilburys, my shared experience writing a song with other songwriters is not that great. Of course, unless you find the right person to write with as a partner... [Laughs] ... you're awfully lucky if you do, but if you don't, it's really more trouble than it's worth, trying to write something with somebody.

ST: Your collaborations with Jacques Levy came out pretty great.

Dylan: We both were pretty much lyricists. Yeah, very panoramic songs because, you know, after one of my lines, one of his lines would come out. Writing with Jacques wasn't difficult. It was trying to just get it down. It just didn't stop. Lyrically . Of course, my melodies are very simple anyway so they're very easy to remember.

ST: With a song like "Isis" that the two of you wrote together, did you plot that story out prior to writing the verses?

Dylan: That was a story that [Laughs] meant something to him. Yeah. It just seemed to take on a life of its own, [Laughs] as another view of history. [Laughs] Which there are so many views that don't get told. Oh history, anyway. That wasn't one of them. Ancient history but history nonetheless.

ST: Was that a story you had in mind before the song was written?

Dylan: No. With this "Isis" thing, it was "Isis"... you know, the name sort of rang a bell but not in any kind of vigorous way. So therefore, it was name-that-tune time. It was anything. The name was familiar. Most people would think they knew it from somewhere. But it seemed like just about any way it wanted to go would have been okay, just as long as it didn't get too close. [Laughs]

ST: Too close to what?

Dylan: [Laughs] Too close to me or him.

ST: People have an idea of your songs freely flowing out from you, but that song and many others of yours are so well-crafted; it has as ABAB rhyme scheme which is like something Byron would do, interlocking every line --

Dylan: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, sure. If you've heard a lot of free verse, if you've been raised on free verse, William Carlos Williams, e.e. cummings, those kind of people who wrote free verse, your ear is not going to be trained for things to sound that way. Of course, for me it's no secret that all my stuff is rhythmically oriented that way. Like a Byron line would be something as simple as "What is it you buy so dear/with your pain and with your fear?" Now that's a Byron line, but that could have been one of my lines. Up until a certain time, maybe in the twenties, that's the way poetry was. It was that way. It was... simple and easy to remember. And always in rhythm. It had a rhythm whether the music was there or not.

ST: Is rhyming fun for you?

Dylan: Well, it can be, but, you know, it's a game. You know, you sit around... you know, it's more like it's mentally... mentally... it gives you a thrill. It gives you a thrill to rhyme something you might think, "Well, that's never been rhymed before." But then again, people have taken rhyming now, it doesn't have to be exact anymore. Nobody's going to care if you rhyme 'represent' with 'ferment,' you know. Nobody's gonna care.

ST: That was a result of a lot of people of your generation for whom the craft elements of songwriting didn't seem to matter as much. But in your songs the craft is always there, along with the poetry and the energy --

Dylan: My sense of rhyme used to be more involved in my songwriting than it is... Still staying in the unconscious frame of mind, you can pull yourself out and throw up two rhymes first and work it back. You get the rhymes first and work it back and then see if you can make it make sense in another kind of way. You can still stay in the unconscious frame of mind to pull it off, which is the state of mind you have to be in anyway.

ST: So sometimes you will work backwards, like that?

Dylan: Oh, yeah. Yeah, a lot of times. That's the only way you're going to finish something. That's not uncommon, though.

ST: Do you finish songs even when you feel that maybe they're not keepers?

Dylan: Keepers or not keepers... you keep songs if you think they're any good, and if you don't... you can always give them to somebody else. If you've got songs that you're not going to do and you just don't like them... show them to other people, if you want. Then again, it all gets back to the motivation. Why you're doing what you're doing. That's what it is. [Laughs] It's confrontation with that... goddess of the self. God of the self or goddess of the self? Somebody told me that the goddess rules over the self. Gods don't concern themselves with such earthly matters. Only goddesses... would stoop so low. Or bend down so low.

ST: You mentioned that when you were writing "Every Grain Of Sand" that you felt you were in an area where no one had ever been before --

Dylan: Yeah. In that area where Keats is. Yeah. That's a good poem set to music.

ST: A beautiful melody.

Dylan: It's a beautiful melody, too, isn't it? It's a folk derivative melody. It's nothing you can put your finger on, but, you know, yeah, those melodies are great. There ain't enough of them, really. Even a song like that, the simplicity of it can be... deceiving. As far as... a song like that just may have been written in great turmoil, although you would never sense that. Written but not delivered. Some songs are better written in peace and quiet and delivered in turmoil. Others are best written in turmoil and delivered in a peaceful, quiet way. It's a magical thing, popular song. Trying to press it down into everyday numbers doesn't quite work. It's not a puzzle. There aren't pieces that fit. It doesn't make a complete picture that's ever been seen. But, you know, as they say, thank God for songwriters.

ST: Randy Newman said that he writes his songs by going to it every day, like a job --

Dylan: Tom Paxton told me the same thing. He goes back with me, way back. He told me the same thing. Everyday he gets up and he writes a song. Well, that's great, you know, you write the song and then take your kids to school? Come home, have some lunch with the wife, you know, maybe go write another song. Then Tom said for recreation, to get himself loose, he rode his horse. And then pick up his child from school, and then go to bed with the

wife. Now to me that sounds like the ideal way to write songs. To me, it couldn't be any better than that.

ST: How do you do it?

Dylan: Well, my songs aren't written on a schedule like that. In my mind it's never really been seriously a profession... It's been more confessional than professional. Then again, everybody's in it for a different reason.

ST: Do you ever sit down with the intention of writing a song, or do you wait for songs to come to you?

Dylan: Either or. Both ways. It can come... some people are... It's possible now for a songwriter to have a recording studio in his house and record a song and make a demo and do a thing. It's like the roles have changed on all that stuff. Now for me, the environment to write the song is extremely important. The environment has to bring something out in me that wants to be brought out. It's a contemplative, reflective thing. Feelings really aren't my thing. See, I don't write lies. It's a proven fact: Most people who say I love you don't mean it. Doctors have proved that. So love generates a lot of songs. Probably more so than a lot. Now it's not my intention to have love influence my songs. Any more than it influenced Chuck Berry's songs or Woody Guthrie's or Hank Williams'. Hank Williams, they're not love songs. You're degrading them songs calling them love songs. Those are songs from the Tree of Life. There's no love on the Tree of Life. Love is on the Tree of Knowledge, the Tree of Good and Evil. So we have a lot of songs in popular music about love . Who needs them? Not you, not me. You can use love in a lot of ways in which it will come back to hurt you. Love is a democratic principle. It's a Greek thing. A college professor told me that if you read about Greece in the history books, you'll know all about America. Nothing that happens will puzzle you ever again. You read the history of Ancient Greece and when the Romans came in, and nothing will ever bother you about America again. You'll see what America is. Now, maybe, but there are a lot of other countries in the world besides America... [Laughs] Two. You can't forget about them. [Laughter]

ST: Have you found there are better places in the world than others to write songs?

Dylan: It's not necessary to take a trip to write a song. What a long, strange trip it's been , however. But that part of it's true, too. Environment is very important. People need peaceful, invigorating environments. Stimulating environments. In America there's a lot of repression. A lot of people who are repressed . They'd like to

get out of town, they just don't know how to do it. And so, it holds back creativity. It's like you go somewhere and you can't help but feel it. Or people even tell it to you, you know? What got me into the whole thing in the beginning wasn't songwriting. That's not what got me into it. When "Hound Dog" came across the radio, there was nothing in my mind that said, "Wow, what a great song, I wonder who wrote that?" It didn't really concern me who wrote it. It didn't matter who wrote it. It was just... it was just there. Same way with me now. You hear a good song. Now you think to yourself, maybe, "Who wrote it?" Why? Because the performer's not as good as the song, maybe. The performer's got to transcend that song. At least come up to it. A good performer can always make a bad song sound good. Record albums are filled with good performers singing filler stuff. Everybody can say they've done that. Whether you wrote it or whether somebody else wrote it, it doesn't matter. What interested me was being a musician. The singer was important and so was the song. But being a musician was always first and foremost in the back of my mind. That's why, while other people were learning... whatever they were learning. What were they learning way back then?

ST: "Ride, Sally, Ride"?

Dylan: Something like that. Or "Run, Rudolph, Run." When the others were doing "Run, Rudolph, Run," my interests were going more to Leadbelly kind of stuff, when he was playing a Stell 12-string guitar. Like, how does the guy do that? Where can one of these be found, a 12-string guitar? They didn't have any in my town. My intellect always felt that way. Of the music. Like Paul Whiteman. Paul Whiteman creates a mood. Bing Crosby's early records. They created a mood, like that Cab Calloway, kind of spooky horn kind of stuff. Violins, when big bands had a sound to them, without the Broadway glitz. Once that Broadway trip got into it, it became all sparkly and Las Vegas, really. But it wasn't always so. Music created an environment. It doesn't happen anymore. Why? Maybe technology has just booted it out and there's no need for it. Because we have a screen which supposedly is three-dimensional. Or comes across as three-dimensional. It would like you to believe it's three-dimensional. Well, you know, like old movies and stuff like that that's influenced so many of us who grew up on that stuff. [Picks up Peruvian flute] Like this old thing, here, it's nothing, it's some kind of, what is it?... Listen: [Plays a slow tune on the flute] Here, listen to this song. [Plays more] Okay. That's a song. It don't have any words. Why do songs need words? They don't. Songs don't need words. They don't.

ST: Do you feel satisfied with your body of work?

Dylan: Most everything, yeah.

ST: Do you spend a lot of time writing songs?

Dylan: Well, did you hear that record that Columbia released last year, *Down In The Groove* ? Those songs, they came in pretty easy.

ST: I'd like to mention some of your songs, and see what response you have to them.

Dylan: Okay.

ST: "One More Cup Of Coffee" [from "Desire"]

Dylan: [Pause] Was that for a coffee commercial? No... It's a gypsy song. That song was written during a gypsy festival in the south of France one summer. Somebody took me there to the gypsy high holy days which coincide with my own particular birthday. So somebody took me to a birthday party there once, and hanging out there for a week probably influenced the writing of that song. But the "valley below" probably came from someplace else. My feeling about the song was that the verses came from someplace else. It wasn't about anything, so this "valley below" thing became the fixture to hang it on. But "valley below" could mean anything.

ST: "Precious Angel" [from "Slow Train Comin'"]

Dylan: Yeah. That's another one, it could go on forever. There's too many verses and there's not enough. You know? When people ask me, "How come you don't sing that song anymore?" It's like it's another one of those songs: it's just too much and not enough. A lot of my songs strike me that way. That's the natural thing about them to me. It's too hard to wonder why about them. To me, they're not worthy of wondering why about them. They're songs . They're not written in stone . They're on plastic.

ST: To us, though, they are written in stone, because Bob

Dylan wrote them. I've been amazed by the way you've changed some of your great songs --

Dylan: Right. Somebody told me that Tennyson often wanted to rewrite his poems when he saw them in print.

ST: "I and I" [from "Infidels"]

Dylan: [Pause] That was one of them Caribbean songs. One year a bunch of songs just came to me hanging around down in the islands, and that was one of them.

ST: "Joey" [from "Desire"]

Dylan: To me, that's a great song. Yeah. And it never loses its appeal.

ST: And it has one of the greatest visual endings of any song.

Dylan: That's a tremendous song. And you'd only know that singing it night after night. You know who got me singing that song? [Jerry] Garcia. Yeah. He got me singing that song again. He said that's one of the best songs ever written. Coming from him, it was hard to know which way to take that. [Laughs] He got me singing that song again with them [The Grateful Dead]. It was amazing how it would, right from the gate go, it had a life of its own, it just ran out of the gate and it just kept on getting better and better and better and better and it keeps on getting better. It's in its infant stages, as a performance thing. Of course, it's a long song. But, to me, not to blow my own horn, but to me the song is like a Homer ballad. Much more so than "A Hard Rain," which is a long song, too. But, to me, "Joey" has a Homeric quality to it that you don't hear everyday. Especially in popular music.

ST: "Ring Them Bells" [from "Oh Mercy"]

Dylan: It stands up when you hear it played by me. But if another performer did it, you might find that it probably wouldn't have as much to do with bells as what the title proclaims. Somebody once came and sang it in my dressing room. To me. [Laughs] To try to influence me to sing it that night. [Laughter] It could have gone either way, you know. Elliot Mintz: Which way did it go?

Dylan: It went right out the door. [Laughter] It went out the door and didn't come back. Listening to this song that was on my record, sung by someone who wanted me to sing it... There was no way he was going to get me to sing it like that. A great performer, too.

ST: "Idiot Wind" [from "Blood On The Tracks"]

Dylan: "Idiot Wind." Yeah, you know, obviously, if you've heard both versions you realize, of course, that there could be a myriad of verses for the thing. It doesn't stop. It wouldn't stop. Where do you end? You could still be writing it, really. It's something that could be a work continually in progress. Although, on saying that,

let me say that my lyrics, to my way of thinking, are better for my songs than anybody else's. People have felt about my songs sometimes the same way as me. And they say to me, your songs are so opaque that, people tell me, they have feelings they'd like to express within the same framework. My response, always, is go ahead, do it, if you feel like it. But it never comes off. They're not as good as my lyrics. There's just something about my lyrics that just have a gallantry to them. And that might be all they have going for them. [Laughs] However, it's no small thing.



THE AGE, APRIL 3, 1992

Interviewer: Peter Wilmoth

DYLAN: Jokes, laughter and a series of dreams, published on The Age

Bob Dylan is considering the symbolism of the '60s voice of youth turning 50 last year. "Well, Rod's around," he says. "He must be close to me or even above me. (Rod Stewart is 47). A couple of 'em are around. The Stones."

What does he think of the Stones 30 years later? Dylan breaks up laughing. "If you like that sort of thing."

Bob Dylan: sit-down comic? The man who has been called one of this century's most influential - and possibly earnest - figures is not expansive, but he's not walking out of the interview after seven minutes either, as he did to one journalist.

This is a kinder, gentler Dylan, cooling off after his first Melbourne show on Wednesday night. Dylan is a small man, almost curled up in his chair. His shoulders are hunched against intrusion. He offers a limp hand and a grunt in greeting. This is Dylan in a good mood.

Why Dylan has agreed to meet a journalist after refusing 300 requests for interviews when he turned 50 in May last year is unclear. But 'The Age' is the beneficiary of half an hour of sometimes incomprehensible, sometimes lucid thoughts, punctuated by three or four belly laughs. America's greatest living poet is actually being charming.

Since he became famous in the coffee shops of New York's Greenwich Village in 1961, Dylan has embodied other people's dreams and ideals of the '60s. "People seem now to have forgotten about it," he says. "People are now more or less interested in the '90s. Sixties memories are fading a little."

There seems to be a '60s revival every few months. Dylan smiles. "There were '60s revivals in the '60s."

When journalists are finally allowed to touch the hem, they are usually forewarned not to get personal. "There's nothing that is really very interesting about me," Dylan protests, laughing. "Talking about me doesn't make a conversation more interesting. It doesn't interest me to talk about me. It's my least favourite subject (laughs again)."

But Dylan seems happy enough when asked about his children Anna, 25, and Jacob, 21, who, with Sara Dylan were immortalised in the song 'Sara' from his acclaimed 1975 album 'Desire'.

"They're just around. I have an extended family, this, that and the other. We get on well, for the most part."

After 30 years of singing 'Blowin' in The Wind', does he perform the early songs under sufferance? "I do those songs because they feel right to sing," he says. "Even if they weren't my songs, they're my style of song, and they're oriented to what I'm doing today."

He is tired of interpreting his early songs too literally. "Some of my records I've been overloaded with, some parts and arrangements," he admits. "Whereas the song itself still has its strength for me. With some of the older songs, the vision is still quite focused."

Strangely, he admits to changing the list of songs he performs to keep certain fans happy. "There are a lot of people that come to our shows lots of times, so just for them, it's a good idea to do different things. It's not like they come and see me once."

Dylan has recently been the subject of a biography, Clinton Heylin's 'Behind the Shades', and there are several retrospectives, including a three-CD boxed set of "bootlegged" versions of his earliest songs. "Well, you know, people bootleg concerts, they might as well be out legally. Nobody would ever have thought that was that big a business. They sell quite a bit."

Was there any music Dylan admires today? "No. Nothing." He believes music lost the plot. "There was a cut-off point sometime." The early '70s? "Maybe. When the machines got into making music, you could turn it off more. It seemed to take a different turn at that point and the purpose got kind of lost."

The audience at Dylan's shows consists largely of people who were in nappies when he released 'All Along The Watchtower' in 1968. "I'm lucky to have any audience," Dylan says. "A lot of my contemporaries really don't have any."

His views on Australia are a little disjointed, but he claims to be fascinated by a country so different from his own. "To me Australia is ancient ground broken off from Africa, and that's why there are different animals here. Someone told me kangaroos are prehistoric. The people who are indigenous are prehistoric, too."

"Just looking at the ground... it doesn't look this way in America or Europe. This is ancient territory. For that reason alone, it's worth spending time here."

Dylan said recently that he'd written enough songs. "My songs aren't written like they used to be, which was all the time. They come slower now (laughs)."

Dylan ties a towel around his head and walks out of the dressing room and disappears into his tour bus. To rejuvenate himself, he sometimes decides to escape from the circus. "Oh, I get away to the boondocks somewhere."

(Bob Dylan plays at the Palais Theatre tonight, and on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday.)



TIMES THEY ARE A CHANGIN'.... DYLAN SPEAKS, APRIL 7, 1994

*By: Ellen Futterman, Post-Dispatch Entertainment Editor Date: 7 April 1994
Section: G1, 7 [Ms. Futterman's windy but respectful intro deleted].*

Q: You're known for being unpredictable at your concerts in terms of what you play. What can the audience at your St. Louis concert expect?

A: Well, I've got a four-piece band. I don't know. Some old Dylan, some new, some of the acoustic stuff. The set list changes from night to night, so it's difficult to pin down what we've planned. Most of the songs will be recognizable to fans.

Q: Are you going to do another rock album or stay with the acoustic, folk sound featured on your last two albums?

A: I might have to make another one like the last two. A lot of stuff didn't get on those. It'd be folk-oriented, but I'd use additional instruments that would give a little different sound ... the banjo, maybe even a mandolin, a dulcimer.

The last two albums were necessary for me to do. I wanted to see if it was possible to play and sing and make a record all by myself with just a fraction of all that instrumentation and get a more full-bodied sound.

Paul McCartney, Peter Gabriel and maybe even Phil Collins have done it whereb they've played all the instruments. I wanted to get as much out of those songs as possible. Sometimes you can rescue those songs by yourself without a lot of other stuff cluttering them up. The point you try to get across is more resonant.

Q: Are you still writing new material or taking a break from that?

A: Well, yeah, I do have a bunch of papers and notes and things lying around. Only time is going to tell when those things come out.

Q: What's your favorite Dylan song?

A: That's really hard to say. That would be scandalous. It's very difficult to pinpoint one. Each has its own moment.

Q: What sort of new music do you enjoy?

A: I usually listen to songs about things. My musical taste ran out in the mid-60's. I listened to all that stuff and I still do, it never gets tiresome for me. But there are a lot of new artists who've got a lot of illustrious things to say. [When pressed to name a few, however, he didn't offer any up.]

Q: How do you like the new Judy Collins album, where she does only Dylan songs?

A: Is that out yet? I know she was working on it. I haven't heard it. I go back a long time with her. We used to work together in coffeehouses.

Q: What kind of touch do you keep with your folk buddies from the 60's.

A: Joan [Baez] calls me from time to time. We did some shows in Germany a few years back. I was just on a Mike Seeger record.

Q: It seems as if you're always doing new things and reinventing yourself. What keeps you moving and motivated?

A: Just life itself. There's a certain non-transparency to life that keeps me motivated. I try not to work in a linear way. That's incumbent on what's given to you at any given moment. There might be inconsistencies to that, nevertheless, it does give you a degree of independence you might not get any other way.

Q: Having had 3 decades to adjust, are you more comfortable being a living legend?

A: I try to be an illuminated person. Nobody should put anyone on a pedestal - it really can damage a person's mentality and lead to ignorance. At that point, a person ceases to be a person.

Q: How do you protect your privacy?

A: I don't have any privacy, so there's really not much to protect.

Q: While on the road, how do you take care of your health and spirituality? What kinds of things do you do for yourself?

A: I try not to be a loafer. I don't work out. Maybe I'll ride a motorcycle or go horseback riding.

Q: Your son Jacob has a band called the Wallflowers. What do you think of his band?

A: His music is very humble. They have an impressive sound.

Q: Have you played any gigs together?

A: Just in the garage.

Q: What kind of music does he play?

A: I'm waiting for Neil Young to tell me.



NEWSWEEK, MARCH 20, 1995

Interviewer : Malcom Jones Jr.

A primitive portfolio published on Newsweek

A Primitive's Portfolio BY MALCOLM JONES Jr.

Entertainment: Dylan is reinventing himself again, this time as plain old Bob, the guy who draws

THE ONE SURE THING ABOUT BOB Dylan is that there is no sure thing. In a musical career stretching over more than three decades, he has proven time and again that he owns the most bottomless bag of tricks in the business. With changeling grace, he has embraced folk music, rock and roll, country, and gospel; on his last two albums, pop music's most singular singer-songwriter covered folk songs written and sung before he was born. It's the same with his public pronouncements. In interviews over the years, he has been baleful, apocalyptic, charming, abrasive, squirrely and profound, depending on his mood. When he sat down two weeks ago for an exclusive interview with NEWSWEEK to talk about his latest project, a book of his drawings, he wore the guise of plain old Bob, earnest, articulate, self-deprecating and darn near kitten-cuddly.

"My favorite artists are people like Donatello or Caravaggio or Titian, all those overwhelming guys," he says. "I wouldn't even know where to begin to approach that kind of mastery." Of his own work, he is content to say, "The purpose of my drawings is very undefined. They're very personal drawings, I guess like someone would knit a sweater, y'know?" It takes a while to get used to this kind of talk from the man whose music elevated scorn to an art form. But then, this isn't Dylan the musician, this is Dylan the artist promoting *Drawn Blank* (Random House, \$30), a collection of pencil, charcoal, and pen-and-ink drawings. Every Dylan fan has known for years that he dabbled in art. He did the cover paintings for the Band's debut album "Music From Big Pink," and his own "Self Portrait," and in the '80s, his sketches adorned the album jacket art of "Infidels" and "Empire Burlesque." But with this book he's laid his artistic bid on the line.

Asked where the idea came from, Dylan says it came from his publisher. David Rosenthal, Dylan's editor at Random House, says the idea came from Dylan's people. Dylan denies he had much to do with putting the book together; he submitted drawings and they did the rest. But Rosenthal says Dylan was "deeply, deeply

involved." The only thing that's clear is that the man who sang "It's always been my nature to take chances" is walking on untried ground and doing damage control with every step.

He needn't worry so hard. There's nothing in this book to rival Rembrandt, and the selection might have been more rigorously culled (captions would be nice too). But the best of the work displays a becoming spareness of line and a loopy but engaging sense of composition. Hotel rooms, street scenes, big diesel trucks—Dylan doesn't do pretty. He's content to take the world as he finds it, and whatever is, is interesting.

"I don't concoct drawings out of my head. It's all out there somewhere and that's the only way I can work or get any satisfaction out of doing it," he says, sitting in an empty Manhattan recording studio where, well into a Saturday night, he's been rehearsing his band for a European tour. With his black-and-gray checked shirt hanging out over black slacks, black boots and his every-day-is-a-bad-hair-day hair framing a motel tan, the 53-year-old Dylan looks every inch the rock-and-roll eminence gone a tad long in the tooth. Setting fire to a filtered Camel, he continues, "These drawings, they kind of go with my primitive style of music." Both are based in reality, and in both music making and drawing he aims to lose himself. "It's almost like meditating. I feel like I'm renewed after I make a drawing."

A lot of Dylan's art, his portraits particularly, resemble the drawings high-school kids do for fun on the covers of their notebooks. The difference is that while most people grow up and shy away from art, Dylan persists. Like his music, where professional polish has never been the point, his drawings epitomize the amateur's creed, that homemade, hand-hewn stuff is always the best.

Dylan's fascination with reality does not extend to the virtual variety. Though his life and work recently provided the subject matter for a CD-ROM package entitled "Bob Dylan: Highway 61 Interactive," he has not yet seen it. "I'm just rooted back there in the '50s, and what's got me this far keeps me going," he says with a grin. "I know people who've got that online thing and games and things, but I find it too inhibiting to sit in front of a screen. On any level—I don't even like to sit and watch TV too much. I feel I'm being manipulated."

'Greed': Dylan called his latest, Grammy-winning album "World Gone Wrong," and meant every word of it. Two songs are by the late Georgia bluesman Willie McTell, a musician whose passing he mourned in one of his greatest songs, "Blind Willie McTell" ("Power

and greed and corruptible seed / Seem to be all that there is") and whose work, for Dylan, symbolizes a level of craft fast vanishing. "If you're looking for depth," he says, "you gotta go back." McTell's songs, most written in the '20s, '30s and '40s, are touchstones to reality for Dylan. "To be around a long time, a musician has got to learn what he can trust. These songs are based on reality, like these drawings. These were real things that happened."

Dylan's increasing fascination with the legacy of the past extends to his own early work. "I've been working on some songs for 20 years, always moving toward some kind of perfection," even though "I know it's never going to happen." (The latest incarnation of those songs will appear next month in an album of Dylan's much-lauded MTV "Unplugged" concert.) But art for him has always been about subversive change. As a result, he can't abide those fans who want him to continue performing his old songs exactly the way he recorded them. "I'd rather live in the moment than some kind of nostalgia trip, which I feel is a drug, a real drug that people are mainlining. It's outrageous. People are mainlining nostalgia like it was morphine. I don't want to be a drug dealer." Chuckling at his own joke, the man who has made a career out of reinventing himself stands up to go find more cigarettes and coffee and get back to work.



EDNA GUNDERSEN INTERVIEW, USA TODAY, MAY 5, 1995

Interviewer: Edna Gundersen

"Dylan on Dylan, 'Unplugged' and the Birth of a Song" by Edna Gundersen.

Published on USA Today

On the eve of his MTV Unplugged album, the usually reclusive Bob Dylan agreed to an exclusive chat about his current activities. After a string of West Coast dates this month, he and his band resume touring in Europe in June, then return for a full US tour this fall. He spent three weeks in January writing new songs but probably won't record them before 1996. What else? Read on.

Gundersen:

How did you plan this 'Unplugged' project?

Dylan:

I wasn't quite sure how to do it and what material to use. I would have liked to do old folk songs with acoustic instruments, but there was a lot of input from other sources as to what would be right for the MTV audience. The record company said, "You can't do that, it's too obscure." At one time, I would have argued, but there's no point. OK, so what's not obscure? They said "Knockin' on Heaven's Door."

Gundersen:

And "Like a Rolling Stone," your signature.

Dylan:

I was hearing a lot about how Eric Clapton did "Layla" acoustically for "Unplugged." That influenced me to do the same for "Like a Rolling Stone," but it would never get played that way normally.

Gundersen:

Would you consider an "Unplugged" sequel"?

Dylan:

I'd consider doing "Unplugged" again in a relaxed setting where I didn't feel like I was on the spot. I felt like I had to deliver, and I delivered something that was preconceived for me. That wasn't a problem, but it wasn't necessarily what I wanted to do.

Gundersen:

Do you prefer playing acoustic over electric?

Dylan:

They're pretty much equal to me. I try not to deface the song with electricity or non-electricity. I'd rather get something out of the song verbally and phonetically than depend on tonality of instruments.

Gundersen:

Was performing before TV cameras difficult?

Dylan:

It's hard to rise above some lukewarm attitude toward TV. I've never catered to that medium. It doesn't really pay off for me.

Gundersen:

Was the studio audience a typical Dylan crowd?

Dylan:

I'd never seen them before. (*Laughs*) As I recall, they were in the polite category.

Gundersen:

Did you approve of the finished show?

Dylan:

I can't say. I didn't see it.

Gundersen:

You've been touring a lot in recent years. Obviously you enjoy playing live.

Dylan:

There's a certain part of you that becomes addicted to a live audience. I wouldn't keep doing it if I was tired of it. I do about 125 shows a year. It may sound like a lot to people who don't work that much, but it isn't. BB King is working 350 nights a year.

Gundersen:

Was playing at Woodstock a special moment?

Dylan:

Nah, it was just another show, really. We just blew in and blew out of there. You do wonder if you're coming across, because you feel so small on a stage like that.

Gundersen:

Do any of your songs feel dated or stale to you?

Dylan:

I rarely listen to my old records. Songs to me are alive. They're not based on any con game or racket or humbug. They're real songs and they're right now. They're not songs people can listen to and say, "Oh gee, I remember where I was when I first heart that" or "That speaks for me." My songs aren't like that. They're not disposable. Folk and blues songs aren't either.

Gundersen:

But you've discarded some songs along the way.

Dylan:

Let's face it, some of my songs don't hold up live. I can't think of any right now, but I've tried them over the years and now I just don't do them.

Gundersen:

Do current events, like the Oklahoma bombing, impact on your songwriting?

Dylan:

Chaos is everywhere: lawlessness, disorganization, misrule. I don't know if it impacts my songwriting like it use to. In the past few years, events have affected me and I've addressed them. But unless a song flows out naturally and doesn't have to be chaperoned, it just dissipates.

Gundersen:

Do you write with immortality in mind?

Dylan:

No. It's a here-and-now thing. A lot of songs are just interrogation of yourself. I wouldn't classify myself as any type of songwriter. I try not to force myself anywhere.

Gundersen:

Are there many unwritten songs inside your head?

Dylan:

Probably more that have never come out than ones that have. I get thoughts during the day that I just can't get to. I'll write a verse down and never complete it. It's hard to be vigilant over the whole thing.

Gundersen:

At 53, do you feel a greater urgency about writing?

Dylan:

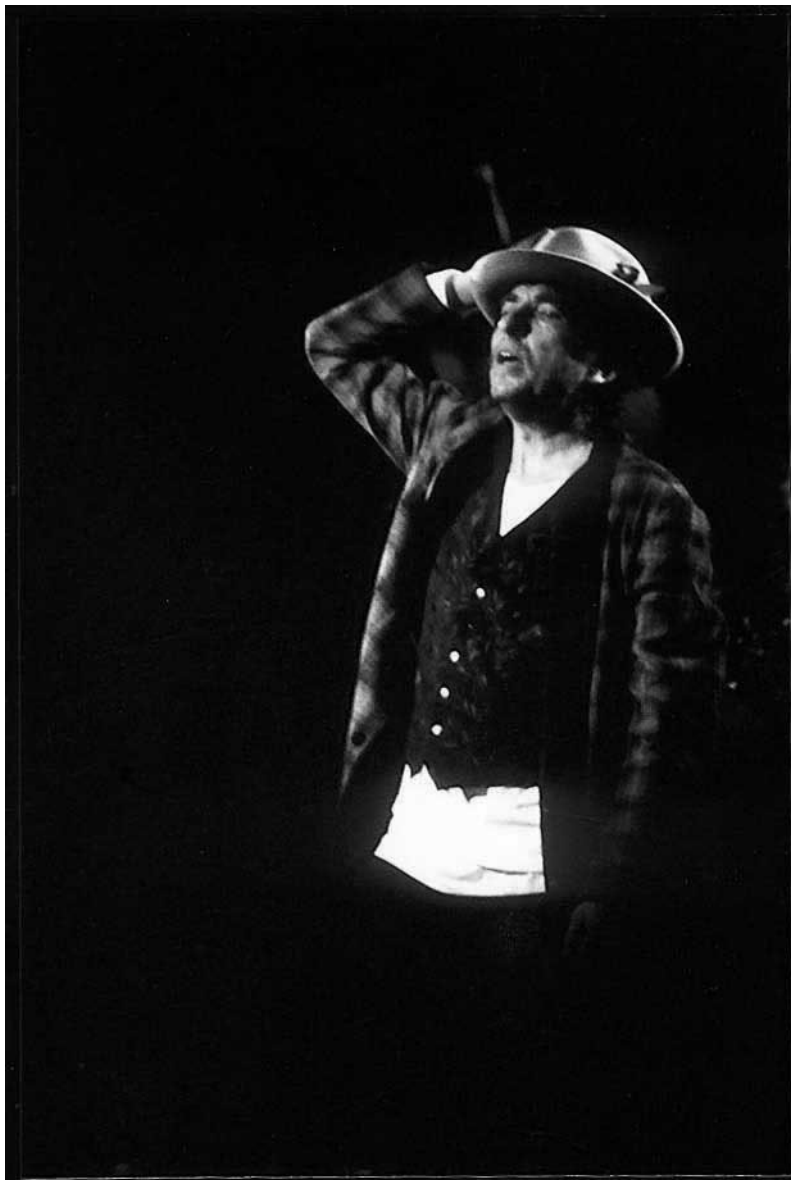
Yeah, it's either that or be completely mindless about it. I've written a whole bunch of songs, so I can't say I didn't get to what I wanted to. As you get older, you get smarter and that can hinder you because you try to gain control over the creative impulse. Creativity is not like a freight train going down the tracks. It's something that has to be caressed and treated with a great deal of respect. If your mind is intellectually in the way, it will stop you. You've got to program your brain not to think too much.

Gundersen:

And how do you do that?

Dylan:

Go out with the bird dogs.



SUN-SENTINEL TODAY, FORT LAUDERDALE, SEPT. 29, 1995

*Fort Lauderdale Interviewer: John Dolen
Printed on the Sun Sentinel*

A MIDNIGHT CHAT WITH BOB DYLAN

Interview by John Dolen

When Bob Dylan calls, it's nearly midnight. When he speaks it is with a clear, distinctive voice. Even though he's at the end of his day, having just returned to a Fort Lauderdale hotel after a band rehearsal, he is contemplative, enigmatic, even poetic.

The Southern leg of his current tour cranks into high gear tonight with the first of two concerts at the Sunrise Musical Theatre. The tour, which has been in progress for more than a year, has earned rave reviews from critics in New York, San Francisco, Dublin. In a nearly hour-long interview with Arts & Features Editor John Dolen, the first in-depth interview he has given to a newspaper this year, Dylan talks about his songs, the creative process and the free gig at The Edge in Fort Lauderdale last Saturday.

Q: Like many others, over the years I've spent thousands of hours listening to your albums. Even now, not a month goes by without me reaching for *Blonde on Blonde*, *Highway 61 Revisited*, *Slow Train Coming*, *Street Legal*, *Oh Mercy*. Do you sit back and look at all these albums and say, hey, that's pretty good?

A: You know it's ironic, I never listen to those records. I really don't notice them anymore except to pick songs off of them here and there to play. Maybe I should listen to them. As a body of work, there could always be more. But it depends. Robert Johnson only made one record. His body of work was just one record. Yet there's no praise or esteem high enough for the body of work he represents. He's influenced hundreds of artists. There are people who put out 40 or 50 records and don't do what he did.

Q: What was the record?

A: He made a record called *King of the Delta Blues Singers*. In '61 or '62. He was brilliant.

Q: Your performance at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame concert in Cleveland earlier this month drew a lot of great notices. Is that important to you? What's your feeling about that institution?

A: I never visited the actual building, I was just over at the concert, which was pretty long. So I have no comment on the interior or any of the exhibits inside.

Q: But how do you feel about the idea of a rock hall of fame itself?

A: Nothing surprises me anymore. It's a perfect time for anything to happen.

Q: At the Edge show Saturday, you did a lot of covers, including some old stuff, like *Confidential*. Was that a Johnny Ray song?

A: It's by Sonny Knight. You won't hear that again.

Q: Oh, was that the reason for your "trying to turn bullshit into gold" comment at the show? Were these covers just something for folks at the Edge? Does that mean you aren't going to be doing more material like that on your tour, including the Sunrise shows?

A: It will be the usual show we're used to doing on this tour now, songs most people will have heard already.

Q: In the vein of non-Dylan music, what does Bob Dylan toss on the CD or cassette player these days?

A: Ever heard of John Trudell? He talks his songs instead of singing them and has a real good band. There's a lot of tradition to what he is doing. I also like Kevin Lynch. And Steve Forbert.

Q: Are there new bands you think are worth bringing to attention?

A: I hear people here and there and I think they're all great. In most cases I never hear of them again. I saw some groups in London summer. I don't know their names.

Q: At this stage of your career, when you've earned every kind of honor and accolade that a person can get, what motivates you?

A: I've had it both ways. I have had good and bad accolades. If you pay any attention to them at all, it makes you pathological. It makes us pathological, to read about ourselves. You try not to pay attention or you try to discard it as soon as possible.

Q: For some writers the motivation is that burden, that you have to get what's inside of you out and down on paper. How is it with you?

A: Like that, exactly. But if I can't make it happen when it comes, you know, when other things intrude, I usually don't make it happen. I don't go to a certain place at a certain time every day to build it. In my case, a lot of these songs, they lay around imperfectly...

Q: As a songwriter, what's the creative process? How does a song like "*All Along the Watchtower*" come about?

A: There's three kinds of ways. You write lyrics and try to find a melody. Or, if you come up with a melody, then you have to stuff the lyrics in there some kinda way. And then the third kind of a way is when they both come at the same time. Where it all comes in a blur: The words are the melody and the melody is the words. And that's the ideal way for somebody, like myself to get going with something. "*All Along the Watchtower*" was that way. It leaped out in a very short time. I don't like songs that make you feel feeble or indifferent. That lets a whole lot of things out of the picture for me.

Q: How did you feel when you first heard Jimi Hendrix's version of "*All Along the Watchtower*"?

A: It overwhelmed me, really. He had such talent, he could find things inside a song and vigorously develop them. He found things that other people wouldn't think of finding in there. He probably improved upon it by the spaces he was using. I took license with the song from his version, actually, and continue to do it to this day.

Q: "*Angelina*", off the Bootleg Series, is such a great song, but no matter how hard I try I can't figure out the words; any clues for me?

A: I never try to figure out what they're about. If you have to think about it, then it's not there.

Q: A song that always haunted me was "*Senor*", from Street Legal. Have you played that at all in last few years?

A: We play that maybe once every third, fourth or fifth show.

Q: In the '70s after years abroad, I remember the incredible elation I felt coming back to the States and hearing your Christian songs, a validation of experiences I had been through in Spain. I remember the lines,

*"You talk about Buddha
You talk about Muhammad*

But you never said a word about the one who came to die for us instead ..."

Those were fearless words. How do you feel about those words and the songs you wrote during that period now?

A: Just writing a song like that probably emancipated me from other kind of illusions. I've written so many songs and so many records that I can't address them all. I can't say that I would disagree with that line. On its own level it was some kind of turning point for me, writing that.

Q: With the great catalog you have and with the success this year with the MTV Unplugged disc, why does this concert tour have such a heavy guitar and drums thing going?

A: It's not the kind of music that will put anybody to sleep.

Q: The other night at the Edge you left the harmonicas on the stand without touching them, any reason for that?

A: They are such a dynamo unto themselves. I pick them up when I feel like it.

Q: You've made several passes through here in the past 10 years. Your thoughts on South Florida?

A: I like it a lot, who wouldn't. There's a lot to like.

Q: Now there is Bob Dylan on CD-ROM, Bob Dylan on the Internet and all that stuff. Are some people taking you too seriously?

A: It's not for me to say. People take everything seriously. You can get too altruistic on your yourself because of the brain ener of other people.

Q: Across the Atlantic is a fellow named Elvis Costello, who, after you, takes a lot of shelf space I my stereo. Both of you are prolific, turn out distinctive albums each time, have great imagery have a lot to say and so on. Is there any reason that in all the years I've never seen your names or faces together?

A: It's funny you should mention that. He just played four or five shows with me in London and Paris. He was doing a lot of new songs, playing them by himself He was doing his thing. You so had So be there.

Q: Is America better or worse than, say, in the days of "*The Times They are A-Changin*"?

A: I see pictures of the '50s, the '60s and the '70s and I see there was a difference. But I don't think the human mind can comprehend the past and the future. They are both just illusions that can manipulate you into thinking there's some kind of change. But after you've been around awhile, they both seem unnatural. It seems like we're going in a straight line, but then you start seeing things that you've seen before. Haven't you experienced that? It seems we're going around in circles.

Q: When you look ahead now, do you still see a Slow Train Coming?

A: When I look ahead now, it's picked up quite a bit of speed. In fact, it's going like a freight train now.



NEW YORK TIMES, SEPT. 27, 1997

Album Review: A Wiser Voice Blowin' In The Autumn Wind

New York Times News Service via Dow Jones

By JON PARELES

c. 1997 N.Y. Times News Service

SANTA MONICA, Calif. - Bob Dylan can barely sit still. He pulls at his curly hair, fidgets with his black T-shirt, constantly shifts position on a comfortable couch.

Sitting in his publicist's oceanside hotel suite for a rare interview, the songwriter who transformed rock is in a jovial mood. He's wearing two-tone patent-leather shoes, there's a twinkle in his blue eyes, and he smiles easily and often.

Dylan is proud of his new album, "Time Out of Mind," and rightfully so. The album, to be released on Tuesday, is far and away his best sustained work since the mid-1970s; it reaches the exalted level of "Blood on the Tracks."

His new songs - his first set of them since 1990 - are embittered, heartsick and weary: "When you think that you've lost everything, you find out you can always lose a little more," he sings in a rasping voice whose familiar cracks have become potholes.

It's the voice of a 56-year-old man who's not hiding any of his bruises. Yet the character who runs through all the songs on the album seems nothing like the relaxed, buoyant songwriter who's talking about them. Asked who the woman was who broke his heart in song after song, he laughs and asks, "Which one? Which song?"

"That's just the nature of my personality," he says. "I can be jubilant one moment and pensive the next, and a cloud could go by and make that happen. I'm inconsistent, even to myself."

During a recording career that now spans 35 years, Dylan has been a cornucopia of inconsistency. Visionary and crank, innovator and conservator, irritant and stimulant, skeptic and proselytizer, rebel and sellout, pathfinder and lost patrol: Dylan has been all of those things, and many more.

He may well be the most restless figure in rock history, constitutionally incapable of doing the same thing twice. Apparently he meant it when he sang, in 1965, that artists "don't look back." "Time Out of Mind" is a typical Dylan album only because it eludes expectations.

In the 1960s, Dylan taught folk singers how to transcend the topical, then taught rock songwriters how to think about something more than the next romance. Casually, he created whole genres: folk rock, country rock and what's now called Americana.

Every facet of his 1960s music has been imitated, lately by his son Jakob's band, the Wallflowers. Through the 1970s and 1980s, Dylan followed more wayward, less reliable inspirations. He created the rock-and-roll caravan called Rolling Thunder. He embraced born-again Christianity and then returned to Judaism.

He toured with the Grateful Dead and Tom Petty's Heartbreakers, and he sold his anthem "The Times They Are a-Changin'" so it could be used in an accounting firm's commercial.

At first deliberately, and even after he repudiated the role, he became a voice for the baby-boomer generation by singing what was on his mind. Just ahead of many of his listeners, he moved from political fervor and apocalyptic visions to marriage and divorce, from searching for faith to grumbling at the nightly news.

Since his bitter divorce from the former Sara Lowndes in the late 1970s, which left her with custody of her five children, including the four they had had together, he has had a home in Malibu, Calif., and kept his private life private. But his reactions to people, ideas and the world have resounded in his songs.

Year in and year out, almost constantly since 1988, Dylan has hit the road. He has become an itinerant musician like the bluesmen and hillbilly troubadours who were his musical education, although his endless tour includes dates like the 1993 inaugural celebration for Bill Clinton and a scheduled show Saturday in Bologna, Italy, before the Pope. "Night or day, it doesn't matter where I go anymore, I just go," he sings in "Can't Wait."

"A lot of people don't like the road," he says, "but it's as natural to me as breathing. I do it because I'm driven to do it, and I either hate it or love it. I'm mortified to be on the stage, but then again, it's the only place where I'm happy. It's the only place you can be who you want to be. You can't be who you want to be in daily life. I don't care who you are, you're going to be disappointed in daily life. But the cure-all for all that is to get on the stage, and that's why performers do it. But in saying that, I don't want to put on the mask of celebrity. I'd rather just do my work and see it as a trade."

During the 1990s, touring with his best group since he was backed by the Band, Dylan has garnered a new audience. His shows a decade ago, often yelled or sung in a monotone, exasperated even longtime fans. But at Dylan concerts lately, collegiate types in the tie-dyed shirts of Deadheads have joined balding baby-boomer loyalists. Audiences respond to the blues and country roots of his band and to Dylan's mercurial, improvisatory side, knowing he sings his songs differently at every show.

"I like those people who come to see me now," Dylan says. "They're not aware of my early days, but I'm glad of that. It lifts that burden of responsibility, of having to play everything exactly like it was on some certain record. I can't do that. Which way the wind is blowing, they're going to come out different every time, but the intent is going to be the same.

"I've got to know that I'm singing something with truth to it. My songs are different than anybody else's songs. Other artists can get by on their voices and their style, but my songs speak volumes, and all I have to do is lay them down correctly, lyrically, and they'll do what they need to do."

Dylan has not lacked for recognition in the 90s. He has collected a lifetime achievement Grammy Award, was named a Commandeur dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in France and will collect a Kennedy Center Honors award in December.

Until the 90s, there was one thing that Dylan had not been: silent. Songs had always poured out of him: great, good, indifferent and awful songs, but in a steady stream. That changed after his mediocre 1990 album, "Under the Red Sky." He went on performing older songs while releasing two albums of traditional folk and blues material, "Good as I Been to You" and "World Gone Wrong," played solo like an early-1960s Greenwich Village folkie. "Dignity," the one new song he released after "Red Sky," was an outtake from the 1989 album "Oh Mercy."

What made him quit recording new songs? "Disillusion," he says. "Disillusion with the whole process of it. I started out when you could go in the studio and record your songs and leave. I don't remember when that changed. But I found myself spending more and more time in the studio doing less and less. There wasn't any gratification in it, really. I was writing the songs, because that's what I do anyway. And then I had my stage band, so I figured, well, I'll write them and I'll play them when I play them. It's not like we lack any songs to play on a stage."

Longtime fans fretted that Dylan wasn't introducing new songs in concert. The reason, he says, was simple: "I don't like to bring out new material because of the bootleg situation." Yet backstage and at sound checks, extraordinary new songs were taking shape.

"Time Out of Mind" (Columbia) is bleak and riveting. Its 11 songs are about the loneliness, anger and desolation of lost love, and about looming mortality. (The album was recorded before Dylan was hospitalized over the summer with a life-threatening heart infection.)

"I've been walking through the middle of nowhere, trying to get to heaven before they close the door," Dylan sings. He has rarely sounded optimistic; spite and self-righteous contempt animate many of his best songs. But "Time Out of Mind" provides fewer comforts than ever.

"Environment affects me a great deal," Dylan says. "A lot of the songs were written after the sun went down. And I like storms, I like to stay up during a storm. I get very meditative sometimes, and this one phrase was going through my head: 'Work while the day lasts, because the night of death cometh when no man can work.' I don't recall where I heard it. I like preaching, I hear a lot of preaching, and I probably just heard it somewhere. Maybe it's in Psalms, it beats me. But it wouldn't let me go. I was, like, what does that phrase mean? But it was at the forefront of my mind, for a long period of time, and I think a lot of that is instilled into this record."

Many of the songs echo the chord structures of 1960s classics like "Ballad of a Thin Man" and "Just Like a Woman," but with the youthful cockiness of those sessions turned inside out. The producer Daniel Lanois (who has also worked with U2, Peter Gabriel and Emmylou Harris) makes the band sound as if it is coalescing on the spot. Instruments enter one by one, feeling their way into the tunes as if they're sneaking into a speak-easy jam session.

Yet the impromptu, unsettled sound is a very deliberate choice. "I wasn't interested in making a record that took the songs and made them into a contemporary setting," Dylan says. "My music, my songs, they have very little to do with technology. They either work or they don't work. Daniel and I made that record 'Oh Mercy' a while back, and that was pretty good at the time. But these songs, I felt, were more all-encompassing. They were more filled with the dread realities of life.

“Many of my records are more or less blueprints for the songs. This time, I didn't want blueprints, I wanted the real thing. When the songs are done right they're done right, and that's it. They're written in stone when they're done right.”

Instead of constructing the music layer by layer, Dylan worked through the songs with his musicians, including the Tex-Mex electric-organ legend Augie Meyers, the guitarist Duke Robillard and the linchpin of Dylan's touring band, Tony Garnier on bass. Nearly everything on the album, including vocals, was recorded live in the studio.

“We all know what the thing should sound like. We're just getting further and further away from it,” Dylan says. “I wanted something that goes through the technology and comes out the other end before the technology knows what it's doing.”

The purposely unpolished music - clattering rockabilly drums and ricocheting guitars in “Cold Irons Bound,” loping blues with raw guitar jabs in “'Til I Fell in Love With You,” slinky electric piano over a reggae backbeat in “Love Sick,” tentative gospel in “Tryin' to Get to Heaven” - has a haunted, precarious tone that connects it to the most harrowing depths of the blues.

The blues has always been a Dylan touchstone, for both words and music. In many ways, his groundbreaking 1960s songs were transmuted blues, from the surreal juxtapositions of the lyrics to the rough-hewn vocals to the blues bands he hired when he plugged in.

Throughout “Time Out of Mind,” Dylan quotes hoary blues lines like “Going down the road feeling bad.” And in his maturity, he is closer than ever to the clear-eyed fatalism of classic blues. In song after song, the singer walks down dark, empty roads, muttering accusations at a woman who left him; he's still wishing she would come back and wondering, in one song, whether he would kiss her or kill her if she did.

When he's not brooding over shattered romance, he's feeling his age and contemplating death. In the 17-minute “Highlands,” he watches young people drinking and dancing, and his voice grows hollow with sadness: “I'd trade places with any of 'em in a minute if I could.”

“I can't help those feelings,” he says. “I'm not going to try to make a fake Pollyanna view. Why would I even want to? And I'm not going to deny them just because they might be a little dismal to look at. I try to let it speak for itself, but I'm not emotionally

involved in it. I can deliver the message. I learned a while ago not to get personally involved, because if you're personally involved you're going to go over the top."

Watching his son Jakob turn into a multimillion-selling hit maker, Dylan tempers his pride with caution. "He's had an amazing amount of success in a short time," Dylan says. "I just don't want to see his heart get broken in this business, that's all."

For Dylan, the songs he grew up on continue to provide the models, and the yardstick, for his own music; "Good as I Been to You" and "World Gone Wrong" only strengthened the connection. "My songs come out of folk music," he says. "I love that whole pantheon. To me there's no difference between Muddy Waters and Bill Monroe."

Going through the tracks on "Time Out of Mind," he points out what he borrowed: among other things, a jug-band guitar line in "Not Dark Yet," an inverted rockabilly lick in "Dirt Road Blues," and a riff and a country-blues lilt from Charley Patton in "Highlands."

"There's a lot of clever people around who write songs," Dylan says. "My songs, what makes them different is that there's a foundation to them. That's why they're still around, that's why my songs are still being performed. It's not because they're such great songs. They don't fall into the commercial category. They're not written to be performed by other people. But they're standing on a strong foundation, and subliminally that's what people are hearing."

"Those old songs are my lexicon and my prayer book," he adds. "All my beliefs come out of those old songs, literally, anything from 'Let Me Rest on That Peaceful Mountain' to 'Keep on the Sunny Side.' You can find all my philosophy in those old songs. I believe in a God of time and space, but if people ask me about that, my impulse is to point them back toward those songs. I believe in Hank Williams singing 'I Saw the Light.' I've seen the light, too." Dylan says he now subscribes to no organized religion.

While Dylan idolized the likes of Mississippi John Hurt and Jimmy Rodgers in the 1960s, he has now achieved their kind of gravity himself. If anything, he sounds more woeful. The voice of a generation has become a voice of experience, telling us that experience hasn't taught him anything he needs. Explicitly or not, the blues and folk masters offered their own survival as reassurance.

But on "Time Out of Mind," Dylan refuses listeners that solace; he often sounds as if he would welcome death. "It's not dark yet, but it's getting there," he sings, unguarded and matter-of-fact.

"I've written some songs that I look at, and they just give me a sense of awe," Dylan says. "Stuff like, 'It's Alright, Ma,' just the alliteration in that blows me away. And I can also look back and know where I was tricky and where I was really saying something that just happened to have a spark of poetry to it.

"But when you get beyond a certain year, after you go on for a certain number of years, you realize, hey, life is kind of short anyway. And you might as well say the way you feel."



“AT THE HEART OF DYLAN”, USA TODAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 1997

*Santa Monica Ca, Printed on USA Today,
Interviewer Edna Gundersen (?)*

SANTA MONICA, Calif. - Heartache. The word literally and figuratively defines Bob Dylan in 1997. After surviving a life-threatening cardiac infection, he is resuming his storied career with a powerful album about lost love and dwindling hope.

Time Out of Mind, in stores Tuesday, examines mortality and heartbreak in 11 raw and potent tracks. Though finished long before Dylan was hospitalized, the lyrics carry added resonance in light of his illness.

Disciples will ruminate over lines like "When you think you've lost everything, you find you can lose a little more," "It's not dark yet but it's getting there" and "I was on anything but a roll."

At 56, nearly four decades after his first public appearances, Dylan is on a roll. A chorus of praise greets Time Out of Mind: A+ in Entertainment Weekly, ** in Rolling Stone, "his best sustained work since the mid-1970s," raves The New York Times. He's Newsweek's cover boy. On Saturday, he played for the pope. In December, he'll become the first rock star anointed a Kennedy Center honoree.**

Dylan, slim and natty in a black shirt, slacks and patent leather loafers, seems anything but morose during a rare interview. His clear blue eyes, ready smile and animated demeanor suggest good health and high spirits. He is quick to discourage analysts who'd dismantle his songs for clues about death and despair.

"I don't think they should or could be interpreted that way, if at all," he says, his back to a hotel window that frames the Pacific sunset. "You can't interpret a Hank Williams song. He's done the interpretation and the performance, and that's it. Now it's for the listener to decide if it moves him or not. That's something you don't even decide. That happens to you unconsciously.

"I let the songs fly, and people respond. Whether they make a valid interpretation or look at it with a false eye, I'm not concerned with that."

Nor is the ferociously private Dylan willing to expound on Time's tales of shattered romance, except to acknowledge that the songs are drawn from personal experience.

"I can identify with other people and situations, but I tend not to," he says. "I would rather recall things from my own life, and I don't have to force myself. . . . Just being in certain environments triggers a response in my brain, a certain feeling I want to articulate. For some reason, I am attracted to self-destruction. I know that personal sacrifice has a great deal to do with how we live or don't live our lives.

"These songs are not allegorical," Dylan stresses. "I have given that up. . . . Philosophical dogma doesn't interest me."

Pop's most scrutinized yet inscrutable artist doesn't deny his mercurial nature or his disdain for the labels of rebel, poet and prophet. Though he radically transformed folk, rock and the singer/songwriter genre in the '60s, he refuses to clone seminal works and adopts a humble stance.

"I don't consider myself a songwriter in the sense of Townes Van Zandt or Randy Newman," he says. "I'm not Paul Simon. I can't do that. My songs come out of folk music and early rock 'n' roll, and that's it. I'm not a classical lyricist, I'm not a meticulous lyricist. I don't write melodies that are clever or catchy. It's all very traditionally documented."

The most influential songwriter of modern times recognizes that his mass appeal has waned.

"I'm under the impression that people aren't really paying attention to my records," he says. "I'm aware that I don't sell records like I did in the '80s or the '70s, and that's OK as long as I can play, and the right crowd is going to come and see it properly. I don't follow what records are at the top of the charts. I ceased doing that a long, long time ago."

He does, however, take notice of rising son Jakob, whose band the Wallflowers, No. 31 after 64 weeks on Billboard's chart, commercially outranks his dad's '90s output.

"I'm proud of his accomplishments," Dylan says. "He's still young, and he's come a long way in a short time. I worried about him when he started out. I just didn't want to see him get roughed up. This business can throw you into deep water."

The murkiest depths? Celebrity. "It mortifies me to even think that I am a celebrity," Dylan says. "I'm not one, and I never want to be one. I lead a very insular existence. It's different on stage, because those people look at me as a performer.

"By being a celebrity, you lose your anonymity. It short-circuits your creative powers when people come up and interrupt your train of thought. They consider you completely approachable. And you can't be rude to people, so basically you shut yourself down. I know I do. I shut myself down when people come up and want to shake my hand or want to talk. That's just dead time."

Dylan avoids the press, loathes photo sessions and steadily releases records with scant promotion.

Time contains his first batch of originals since 1990's *Under the Red Sky*. Since then, he has released a boxed set of rarities, his third greatest hits album, an MTV *Unplugged*, and two collections of vintage folk and blues, 1992's *Good as I Been to You* and 1993's *World Gone Wrong*.

Making *Time* was a liberating experience for Dylan, who can feel burdened by the weight of his legend. The classics he performs on stage "are proven to be true and strong, otherwise I couldn't sing them night after night," he says. "It's not like I can eclipse that.

"I'm not looking to do that, but to record new songs, they have to be in that arena, and that's why it took a long time. I was constantly thinking, will these songs stand up to what I'm playing night after night?"

Dylan considers his early records roughly sketched prototypes that later matured onstage. Produced by Daniel Lanois last January in a Miami studio, the new songs were captured live with sidemen schooled in low-tech production.

"This record is not a blueprint," Dylan says. "This is it. This is the way these songs should go, every single last one. This record went through evolutions. What you hear comes through that whole maze, that labyrinth of fire that it takes to perfect the arrangement and structure.

"There is nothing contemporary about it. There is no trickery. We went back to the way a primitive record was made, before the advent of technology. It's almost a revolutionary concept these days."

The man who shocked the folk rank and file by plugging in now worries that high-watt noise is eradicating traditional American music.

"You see all this electricity speaking, all this wizardry," he says. "Pull out the plugs and probably very few of these people could move you, because they can't play. They are dominated by the electricity. Guys like Elmore James played acoustically and used electricity so they could be heard in a crowded room. They weren't depending on electricity to hide talent they didn't have. I don't want a bunch of flaky sounds. It's a dead end."

Dylan was still sequencing Time tracks when he was stricken with chest pains in May. He was declared fit after an initial medical exam.

"I accepted that, but the pain didn't go away," he says. "It was intolerable pain, where it affects your breathing every waking moment."

He entered a hospital May 25 and was diagnosed with pericarditis, a swelling of the sac around the heart, brought on by a fungal infection called histoplasmosis. Dylan spent six weeks off his feet. His brush with death brought delirium and ennui but no spiritual revelations.

"I didn't have any philosophical, profound thoughts," he says. "The pain stopped me in my tracks and fried my mind. I was so sick my mind just blanked out. I'm getting better; that's all I can say right now."

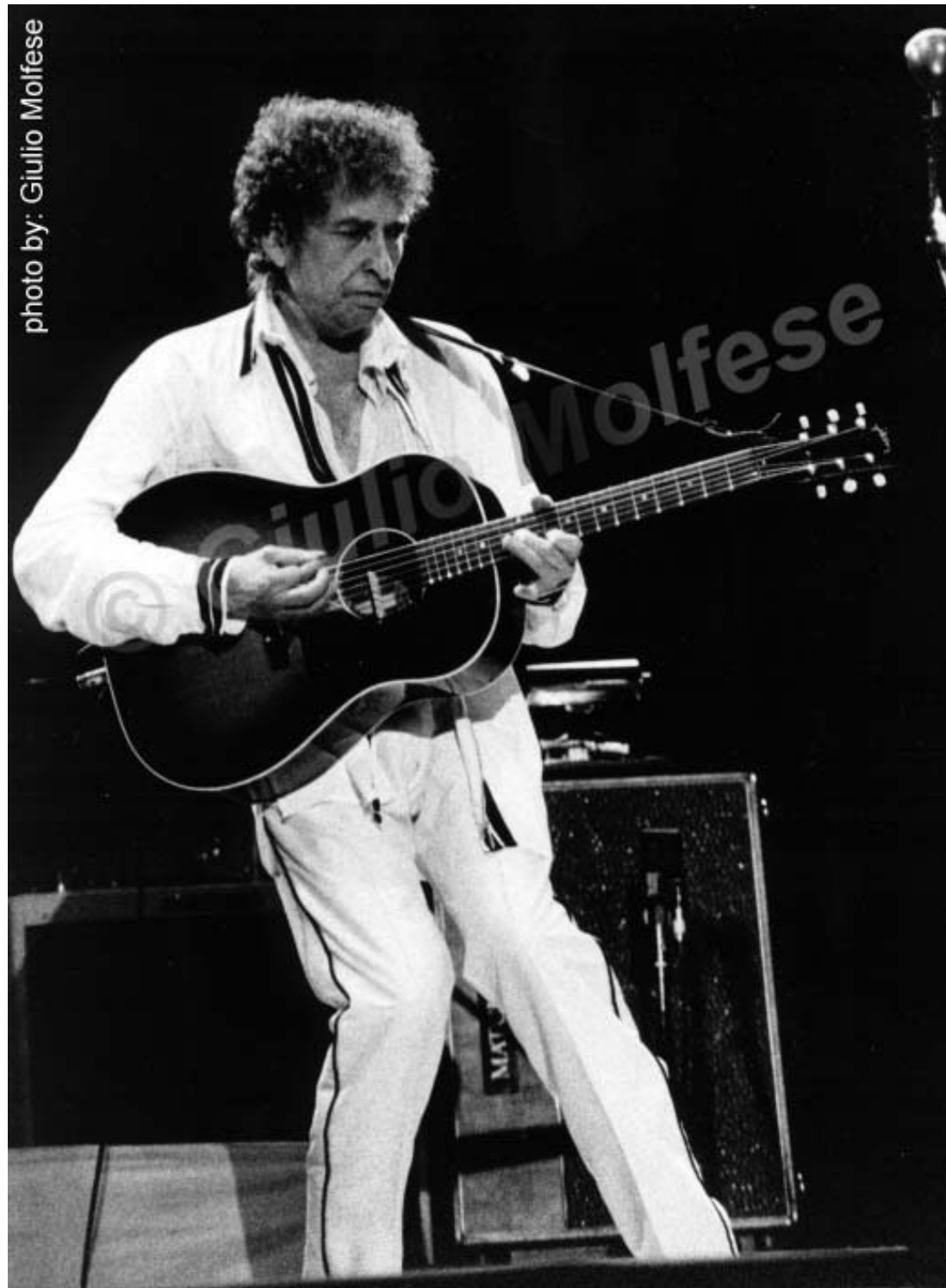
The alignment of events this year - his health scare, broad acclaim for Time Out of Mind, the papal encounter - has magnified Dylan's star power and fed an ongoing deification that he finds perplexing. In 1990, he received France's highest cultural honor. The next year, he got Grammy's lifetime achievement award. And in 1992, an all-star concert, pay-per-view and compilation album toasted his 30th anniversary as a recording artist.

Such honors "are unexpected and unsolicited, and I'm not nonchalant about it, because in some sense it really does matter," he says. "I'm very appreciative."

But he's leery of the hype. Dozens of books are devoted to the enigmatic troubadour. He doesn't read them.

"I'm not going to read a book about myself," he says with a chuckle. "I mean, why? I'm with myself enough. I wake up every

day and I'm still me. It would be torture to read about myself. I would rather read about anybody else but me."



DER SPIEGEL, OCT. 16, 1997

Shakespeare in crocodile slippers
DER SPIEGEL Interviews BOB DYLAN

For two decades the musician Bob Dylan celebrated his big life crisis. Now he has delivered a masterly album and gave an interview to a German magazine for the first time at a press talk in London. It is not that the models, the bankers and the other rich people who hang around in the lobby of the London Metropolitan Hotel are waiting for Bob Dylan. "Bob who?", a creature with very white hair and very long legs asks. When we explain to him (sic!) that "who" is "Dylan", the creature smiles relieved: "Oh, the father of Jakob". Meant is son Jakob Dylan who with his band The Wallflowers in one year has sold three million records - father Bob hasn't sold that much of his most successful 1975 album "Blood on the Tracks" up to this day. Bob Dylan's fame is not of the sort that a platoon of marketing people push his videos to music tv stations, wheedling interviews out of him, selling massive numbers of records or chase the man from one sold out football stadium to another. Of course this is due to the fact that Dylan won't have any of this kind of success. And to the fact that he was searching God for almost twenty years and found himself in a crisis - long enough to enable a whole generation to grow up without having to notice him.

With his new album "Time out of mind" Dylan succeeded to deliver a late masterpiece. In blues and gospel-like songs he tells about the burden of becoming old in a laconic and dark way; about a world in which hope and love exist for other people and in which only one thing is certain: having reached the end of your days you can only rely on yourself to make it through. "It looks like I am moving, but I am standing still", Dylan sings, and it often sounds heroic and funny as if he looked over the shoulder of John Ford and Samuel Beckett alternately. Bob Dylan is proud of this album, so proud that he is willing to give interviews for the first time since his big crisis. Hopping through the door on the tenth floor of the Metropolitan Hotel, he snaps his fingers as if he wanted to storm a concert stage. He's wearing black crocodile slippers, black pants, silver shirt. Just like a nameless musician from an equally nameless bar he only wants to talk about his new album. The myth of being Bob Dylan - he wants to dispose of it like Charlie Chaplin would wipe a piece of shit of his shoe. "The sixties?", Dylan asks when the revolutionary decade all the same comes up and shrugs his shoulders: "I never think of that".

That was the time when Bob Dylan rose as the superior superstar of the counterculture. A charismatic figure who could translate moods and feelings, buzzing around in the leftish, bohemian circles, into songs, poetry and slogans, until The New York Times couldn't do anything else than ennoble him as "the Shakespeare of his generation". He sang about peace, for the black people and in one breath told fairy tales about his background. One time he stemmed from the Sioux, then again he used to play in Elvis's band. Next to Joan Baez he marched in front of the White House and he was quicker, more scornful and cooler than the hangers-on and of course than his enemies - the powerful. "I just want you to know", he sings, "I can see through your masks".

In 1965 at the Newport Folk Festival he wore black sunglasses and high heel boots when he laid down his acoustic guitar and took the electric guitar, played "Like a Rolling Stone" and with this gesture scorned the counterculture. He became the dandy of the Beat 'lite, swallowed amphetamines bagwise and released three incredible albums "Highway 61 revisited", "Subterranean Homesick Blues" (Bringing It All Back Home, in the States [B.N.]) and Blonde on Blonde. About the later he said: "That thin, that wild, mercury sound, metallic and radiant like gold." After that popular music just wasn't the same anymore. In the middle of this flush of creation he had a motor accident, broke a couple of vertebra in his neck and decided that "it was time for something completely different". He withdrew to a farm near Woodstock, founded a family with five kids, invented country rock and stayed away from touring for eight years. When anyone asked if he considered himself as a leader of the young, he answered: "I think there are people who are trained for that kind of work... like the youth worker type, you know? I try to make it through and not get too much on people's nerves." In the seventies his marriage broke up, he toured the world as a superstar and ran into his major crisis. Sometimes, he says, it was that awful that his own songs seemed to be something strange, something he had completely no access to. Bob Dylan didn't look for excuses, only the music he wanted to find again. That's why he recorded two albums of purely acoustic material in the nineties containing old folk and cowboy songs. Now he seems to be able to write good and original material again.

For someone like him, a pioneer, who continually wants to destroy the past, "heading for another joint", it's not getting easier. But now, now that he has the music again, his home is where his music leads him, if necessary on his own, if necessary there where it's dark: a great American. English translation of the interview in Der Spiegel.

"Life is like that - it happens"

Interview with Bob Dylan about popmusic, politics and his new album "Time out of mind".

Q: Mr. Dylan, in the spring you almost died of a heart disease. How are you today? **A:** I'm better now, but for a certain time I was in for some serious worrying.

Q: Did you think that Elvis had enlisted you in his heavenly choir?
A: Absolutely!

Q: Your new album 'Time out of Mind' is considered to be your best in more than twenty years. But it sounds bitter, dark and very lonely...

A: I don't agree at all. What's happening in Bosnia or in South America, that's bitter.

Q: You sing: "Walking through streets that are dead" and "the party is over, there is less and less to say; you complain "My sense of humanity is going down the drain"; and you don't even care much for the women. While you don't care much for love you sing you have to live in "the same old cage".

A: On my first album I already dealt with unhappy relationships. People shouldn't take everything so literal. Elvis sang: "You ain't nothing but a hound dog". It would be very stupid to ask Elvis whether he was serious. You just change from minute to minute. A record catches the atmosphere of the moment. An hour later, everything is different. Whatever is said in this collection of songs - it somehow fits.

Q: Your call "Don't follow leaders, watch the parking meters" was back then in the sixties a super trick because after that you were worshipped even more by a lot of your fans. You're considered to be an incorruptible artist who hates commerce, whose work is authentic and truthful.

A: I sure would like to be spared of the burden to muse about what my fans think about me or my songs. But it's true all right, I seem to be one of the few artists who attract that kind of people.

Q: Since the middle of the sixties it seems that you have enough of being the icon of the counterculture or even their mouth-piece.

A: I don't take these titles as a compliment. I think that words like "icon" or "legend" are just other terms for guys of the day before yesterday of which nobody wants to know these days.

Q: Is it getting to you to be Bob Dylan?

A: It's easier to be me than someone else. But just like most famous people, I just want to be left alone most of the time.

Q: Are you still interested in politics?

A: No. All I care about is my performance as a musician and as a singer. Everything in my life is about the music which I love.

Q: Is it still possible nowadays to influence the world by songs? To be political by means of messages?

A: No, there are newspapers for that. When people want to deal with the world, they should watch television.

Q: That's very passive.

A: The world has become like that. People are going to the football stadium, they don't play themselves anymore.

Q: Did you ever think you could be politically active through your songs?

A: No, no, no. If I had wanted to do that, I would have gone to Harvard or Yale, would have studied and would have become a politician after that.

Q: But then again you did write songs like "Masters of War", in which you threaten the politicians to spit on their graves. And in "The lonesome death of Hattie Carol" and "Hurricane" you protest against race justice.

A: To tell you the truth, I really don't know what politics are. When I am seriously dealing with something, I find myself to be on the side of the right this time and the next moment I am completely on the side of the left side.

Q: Your fellow performers of Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young are convinced that they stopped the Vietnam war.

A: I believe that immediately. They were that kind of guys.

Q: How was it for you to be playing for the Pope in Bologna a few weeks ago?

A: A great show.

Q: Why?

A: It just was.

Q: Isn't it strange that a great enemy of the establishment suddenly performs for the Pope?

A: Why? It's not the same Pope as back then. Part II

Q: So, in your view of the world there is still a past and a future?

A: Yes, but actually people haven't changed since Moses. Feelings don't change.

Q: Before the Pope you played your songs honestly and pure like on the record. Normally the audience should be aware that you might massacre your own songs. Are you bored to play your songs as close to the original as possible? Or do you want to punish your audience?

A: Above all, the critics are the problem. They come with ears that are tuned to 1975 or even more back. And then, my songs lead their own lives, they have an inner truth which is changed from evening to evening. That's why people don't recognise all of the songs. I have recorded my albums at various points of my life, with various musicians using various instruments. If I was to replicate all of that in the original way, I had to drag onehundred people up on the stage.

Q: At the end of the eighties you announced the so-called "Never Ending Tour" and up until now you have performed about 150 times a year. Isn't that becoming just a little bit too much?

A: It's my job, my craft, my trade. Being on stage is to me as natural as breathing. Besides, I am the only one to play this kind of songs. Popular music nowadays is in the same situation as when I was beginning to perform. When somebody is a serious musician, nobody listens to him. Back then we knew when something sounded wrong and we were strong enough to look for people who told the truth. I am a musician, not someone who buys a record every now and then. To me it is all more than just entertainment.

Q: Recently you said: "Sometimes I feel just a little bit above a pimp."

A: When you are up there and you look at the audience and the audience look back, then you - willy-nilly - have the feeling to be in a burlesque. I am pretty sure Pavarotti feels the same way.

Q: Are the people in the audience in Vienna different from a crowd in San Francisco?

A: When I'm up there, I just see faces. A face is a face, they are all the same.

Q: Do you envy the 17 year-olds in your audience for their youth?

A: I am a grandfather. I have grandchildren who like other singers. That's the way young people are. I play for people who understand my feelings.

Q: On your new record that sounds a bit darker. There you sing the line: I wish somebody would push back the clock for me."

A: Don't we all feel that way? I for one feel like that plenty of times. I would prefer to start my life anew over and over again. Learn a new trade, marry another girl, live in another place.

Q: Isn't that just what you did during your career? In the early sixties you were the folk singer of the movement for civil rights. A few years later you took the electric guitar and sang "Like a rolling stone" mocking the counterculture which had you for a hero. People yelled "Judas" at you and you took to the countryside, got settled with a family and played country rock. In other words: during your career you always reinvented yourself and never stayed the way your fans wanted you to be.

A: That is just human nature.

Q: But did you do that consciously or did it just happen?

A: Everything in life just happens. That's the way life is; it happens.

Q: Without meaning or goal?

A: I am sure that there is a great divine meaning behind everything.

Q: Where do your songs come from? Do they come to you just flying through the universe?

A: The folksinger Woody Guthrie was the first to have that idea and I think he is right.

Q: Which music is an influence to you these days?

A: Simple music from the twenties and thirties and a little bit from the fifties. The influence is very limited: american folkmusic, Blues, some Rockabilly. But certainly not Rock 'n Roll. I think Rock 'n Roll never was of any great importance to my work.

Q: Do you listen to the radio these days? Or are you annoyed by popmusic?

A: Every now and then I listen to old radio shows. Sometimes they play the same theatre companies that I grew up with. I think that will come back now.

Q: Would you recognise a contemporary popsong, for example a song by Bon Jovi?

A: No, really, no.

Q: On your new record there is a song that lasts for over 16 minutes and is called "Highlands". It sounds as if it was improvised. How well do you prepare yourself before you enter the studio?

A: I haven't recorded a song like "Highlands" in a long time. I wouldn't say "Highlands" is improvised, but while playing many ideas were connected in a different way than they were written down. Actually it's just a simple blues which can go either this way or that way.

Q: In these cases, don't you wish sometimes you could work again with writer and musician Sam Shepard, who helped you writing songs in the eighties?

A: Well, in the course life you find yourself with different people in different rooms. Working with Sam was not necessarily easier, but it was certainly less meaningless. In every case writing a song is done faster when you got someone like Sam and are not on your own.

Q: It seems, though, that you and Sam would not be able to work it out these days.

A: Sam does his thing, I do mine. He is a writer and I am on the road. It's not that we see each other a lot. Part III

Q: What does the blues mean to you?

A: The blues? An extremely simple and open form by which you can say anything; also, what's being said comes out the way you meant it. But the blues has become rare. I don't even know if people know what to do with it in this world which has become a rat race. The blues stems from the countryside, from the cotton fields in the south. And they dragged it to the big cities and charged it with electricity. Today this has turned into electronics. One does not perceive that out there there is a person that breathes or that there is still a heart out there. And the more people get away from this, the less they are connected with what I call the blues. Like I said, the blues is simple and it comes from the countryside just like country music.

Q: You were raised in the North of the USA, in Minnesota to be precise. How did you get in touch with the blues?

A: When I was young, America was connected above all by means of the radio. The radio was the most important. You had stations who could play whatever they wanted. And all of this was broadcast over thousands of miles. Take Jimmy Hendrix, he grew up in Seattle. The radio connected us all. I don't know when they started to play all that pap, I only know that radio today is different. Someone like the singer Johnny Ray, who was kind of a leper back then, he wouldn't stand a chance today. Johnny Ray had a whole different kind of dynamic, he had heart and soul and he really wanted us to feel something when he sang.

Q: When did you decide that you - the white, Jewish son of a hardware store owner in a northern state of the USA - that you could also play music that made people feel things?

A: My memory does not go that way back or I can't remember ever doing anything else than sing, for that matter. But if somebody back then had an influence on me it must have been the folksinger Woody Guthrie - without really wanting to be influenced.

Q: What did strike you especially in Woody Guthrie?

A: He worked extremely hard and wrote very much and writing was easy for him. He probably didn't have time at all to think about a song very long: being a socialist he wanted to bring the news very quick to the people. In those times, whenever a mine collapsed, songs were written about it instantly. But since we have television people all over the world know what has happened in an instant.

Q: Do you listen to your old songs when your at home?

A: I never listen to my old stuff. I don't want to be reminded of my self or be an influence on my self. I want to go on, always go on...

Q: ... to the old music?

A: There's nothing better.

Q: The times they are a-changin' ...

A: ... but way back.

Q:Last year you sold your protest song "The times they are a-changin'" to the Bank of Montreal, who used it in a commercial. Do you regret this?

A: Not at all.

Q:It is said, you play golf now. What's your handicap?

A: 17 - I hit as if it were a baseball bat.



GUITAR WORLD MAGAZINE, MARCH 1999

*Guitar World Magazine -- March, 1999
Profile: Bob Dylan*

MAXIMUM BOB by Murray Engleheart

In little over a year, he's won a Grammy, survived a dangerous illness, hobnobbed with religious royalty and toured endlessly. He's Bob Dylan, forever young prince of rock and roll.

Bob Dylan, who for much of his fabled career has been the hippest, has now spent more than a year being the hottest as well. He's the man on everyone's A-list, from Eddie Vedder, an avowed fan, to Pope John Paul II, for whom Dylan performed three songs in Bologna, Italy. Dylan even impressed online retailer amazon.com, which recently voted **Bob Dylan Live 1966: The "Royal Albert Hall Concert"* the best album of 1998. As remarkable as it seems, one of the most vital post-grunge artists in rock is 58 year old Bob Dylan. After a rather lean decade, the Sixties folk-rock icon has, against all odds, revitalized his career by polishing off the Nineties with two albums that rank among his very best.

Along with the highly acclaimed "Albert Hall" reissue, Dylan's 1995 Grammy-winning release, **Time Out of Mind**, produced by Daniel Lanois, has put the singer back in rock's vanguard.

Perhaps even more remarkable than Dylan's albums have been his brilliant live shows, showcasing his feisty lead guitar playing and a crack band. After bouncing back from a life-threatening heart infection in mid-'97, Dylan has played well over 200 shows, performing fierce, jam-oriented reinterpretations of his best songs, at times recalling the tightly wound three guitar army of Lynrd Skynrd's "Free Bird." It's all been a far cry from the disappointingly ramshackle shows that became his stock-in-trade in the Eighties and early Nineties.

When Bob Dylan talks -- which is rarely -- people listen. Especially these days. We recently had the opportunity for a brief chat with the enigmatic legend, who finally took a break from his "Never Ending Tour." Dylan seemed relaxed, and was kind enough to reflect on the turbulent events of his recent career, and to speculate on his future.

Guitar World: Bruce Springsteen once said that without you there'd be no Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's*, no Beach Boys *Pet Sounds*, no Sex- Pistols' "God Save the Queen."

Bob Dylan: Well...you know, you can influence all kinds of people, but sometimes it gets in the way -- especially if somebody is accusing you of influencing somebody that you had no interest in influencing in the first place. I've never given it any mind at all, really. I don't really care to influence anybody at this time, and if I have influenced anybody, what can I say?

GW: Certain albums of yours -- *Blood on the Tracks*, *Infidels*, *Highway 61 Revisited* -- have inspired great critical plaudits in their day, and have stood the test of time. In your view, do those records live up to their reputation?

BD: Well, those records were made a long time ago, and you know, truthfully, records that were made in that day and age all were good. They all had some magic to them because the technology didn't go beyond what the artist was doing. It was a lot easier to get excellence back in those days on a record than it is now. I made records back then just like a lot of other people who were my age, and we all made good records. Those records seem to cast a long shadow. But how much of it is the technology and how much of it is the talent and influence, I really don't know. I know you can't make records that sound that way any more. The high priority is technology now. It's not the artist or the art. It's the technology that is coming through. That's what makes *Time Out of Mind* ... it doesn't take itself seriously, but then again, the sound is very significant to that record. If that record was made more haphazardly, it wouldn't have sounded that way. It wouldn't have had the impact that it did. The guys that helped me make it went out of their way to make a record that sounds like a record played on a record player. There wasn't any wasted effort on *Time Out of Mind*, and I don't think there will be on any more of my records.

GW: A writer once noted that Delta bluesman Skip James' records always sound best at night. The same could be said about *Time Out of Mind*.

BD: You think it sounds like Skip James?

GW: In a sense. *Time Out of Mind* sounds best late at night.

BD: That would be a tremendous compliment to me, to hear that it was even in any kind of ... that it would be in the same realm as Skip James.

GW: In terms of mood and ambience, it's almost like there's ghosts running through it. Are those ghosts of, or for, anybody in particular?

BD: Er, no. I'm not versed in the psychological part of it. I don't know. The ghosts you're probably talking about are just probably where the instruments are all placed in the mix. Some are more in the background as opposed to being in the foreground. Or maybe you're just hearing different echoes that emanate from the complete sound of the record.

GW: Jim Dickinson, who played keyboards on **Time Out of Mind**, said something years ago that I thought was fascinating. He said that a lot of people don't realize that the recording process is about freeze-framing the soul.

BD: Yeah. The recording process is very difficult for me. I lose my inspiration in the studio real easy, and it's very difficult for me to think that I'm going to eclipse anything I've ever done before. I get bored easily, and my mission, which starts out wide, becomes very dim after a few failed takes and this and that.

GW: There are elements of country blues and Sun Records production quality on the album.

BD: Well, it's always been there. But in the past, when my records were made, the producer, or whoever was in charge of my sessions, felt it was just enough to have me sing an original song. There was never enough work put into developing the orchestration, and that always made me feel very disillusioned about recording. **Time Out of Mind** is more illuminated, rather than just a song and the singing of that song. The arrangements or structures are really an integral part of the whole.

GW: **Time Out of Mind** was recorded just before you fell ill.

BD: That's right.

GW: Would you have regarded it as a satisfactory final chapter for you?

BD: No, I don't think so. I think we are just starting to get my sound on disc, and I think there's plenty more to do. We just opened up that door at that particular time, and in the passage of time we'll go back in and extend that. But I didn't feel like it was an ending to anything. I thought it was more the beginning.

GW: You've mentioned Buddy Holly in connection with the album. What did his spirit bring to the record?

BD: Buddy Holly. You know, I don't really recall exactly what I said about Buddy Holly, but while we were recording, every place I turned there was Buddy Holly. You know what I mean? It was one of those things. Every place you turned. You walked down a hallway and you heard Buddy Holly records like "That'll Be the Day." Then you'd get in the car to go over to the studio and "Rave On" would be playing. Then you'd walk into this studio and someone's playing a cassette of "It's So Easy." And this would happen day after day after day. Phrases of Buddy Holly songs would just come out of nowhere. It was spooky. [laughs] But after we recorded and left, you know, it stayed in our minds. Well, Buddy Holly's spirit must have been someplace, hastening this record.

GW: There seems to be a renewed interest in your music, particularly among young people. Have you noticed a shift in your audience?

BD: Ah, no, I haven't found any shift, but I've found a different audience. I'm not good at reading how old people are, but my audience seems to be livelier than they were 10 years ago. They react immediately to what I do, and they don't come with a lot of preconceived ideas about who they would like me to be, or who they think I am. Whereas a few years ago they couldn't react quickly. They had to get through too much ...er...

GW: Baggage?

BD: Mental, yeah, mental, psychic stuff, so [sighs] I was still kind of bogged down with a certain crowd of people. It has taken a long time to bust through that crowd. Even the last time I toured with Tom Petty, we were kind of facing that same old crowd. But that's changed. We seem to be attracting a new audience. Not just those who know me as some kind of figurehead from another age or a symbol for a generational thing. I don't really have to deal with that any more, if I ever did.

GW: Do you find that choosing songs for your live performances gets harder or easier as the years go on?

BD: I have so many songs that finding them is the least of my problems. I've got songs that I've never even sung live. I've got 500, 600, 700 songs. I don't have a problem with the backlog of songs. Some fade away and diminish in time, but others take their place.

GW: While there seems there is plenty of room to improvise, your current live sound appears to be more tightly arranged than in previous years.

BD: If you're going to ask me what's the difference between now and when I used to play in the Seventies, Eighties and even back in the Sixties, the songs weren't arranged. The arrangement is the architecture of the song. And that's why our performances are so effective these days, because measure for measure we don't stray from the actual structure of the song. And once the architecture is in place, a song can be done in an endless amount of ways. That's what keeps my current live shows unadulterated. Because they're not diluted, or they're not jumbled up. They're not scrambled, they're not just a bunch of screaming... a conglomerated sound mix. It's like Skip James, who you mentioned earlier, once said: "I don't want to entertain. What I want to do is impress with skill and deaden the minds of my listeners." If you listen to his records -- his old records -- you know he can do that. But if you listen to the records he made in the Sixties, when they rediscovered him, you find that there's something missing. And what's missing is that interconnecting thread of the structure of the songs.

GW: What was the nature of your heart infection? **BD** It was something called histoplasmosis that came from just accidentally inhaling a bunch of stuff that was out on one of the rivers by where I live. Maybe one month, or two to three days out of the year, the banks around the river get all mucky, and then the wind blows and a bunch of swirling mess is in the air. I happened to inhale a bunch of that. That's what made me sick. It went into my heart area, but it wasn't anything really attacking my heart.

GW: You were pretty seriously ill though?

BD: Oh, I was real seriously ill, yeah.

GW: Did that make you pause and rethink things?

BD: I really didn't, you know, because it wasn't something that I brought on myself. It's not like I even needed the time to slow down and re-examine my life. It was just one of those things. I was down for about six weeks, but I don't remember particularly having any kind of great illuminations at that time.

GW: The performance for the Pope at the World Eucharistic Congress in Bologna must have been tremendously moving for you.

BD: Well, it's all surreal, you know? But yeah, it was moving. I mean, he's the Pope. [laughs] You know what I mean? There's only one Pope, right?

GW: Did the irony of playing "Knocking on Heaven's Door" in that situation strike you at the time?

BD: No, because that's the song they wanted to hear. It seemed to be a good correspondence to the situation.

