

Bob Dylan as Dylan

Part 1 of 3

Bob Dylan
Paul Jay Robbins

1966

In Dylan's sixth album he sings a major poem called "Desolation Road." One stanza has to do with Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot sitting in the captain's tower arguing for power while calypso dancers leap on the deck and fishermen hold flowers. The image is relevant to any interview with Dylan, for it illustrates his basic attitude towards showplace words. It has to do with experiencing life, partaking of its unending facets and hangups and wonders instead of dryly discussing it. A typical Dylan interview is more an Absurdist Happening than a fact-finding dialog. He presents himself in shatterproof totality—usually a somewhat bugged and bored mode of it—and lets components fall out as the interview pokes at it. He's not taciturn, he's simply aware of his absurd situation and the desperate clamor of folks who want to know how many times he rubs his eyes upon awakening and why.

I first met him at a promotion party thrown by Columbia Records in a highly self-conscious and slick hotel bar. The people were incompatible with anything Dylan stands for and I ate and drank free goodies and finally saw Dylan enter. He didn't so much enter the party as forcibly indulge himself in it. My fingers were sticky with free barbecued rib sauce as I shook his hand and he was a warm and halated human being.

We talked a while and made a date to meet the next afternoon for a taped interview. That second interview worked beautifully. Dylan became a purely natural person, candid and friendly—with indiginous [sic as in original — web archiver] exceptions. He is quite a nervous cat; his knee bobs like a yo-yo, he darts at each sound, listens to all conversations at once, seems to enjoy doing more than two things at once. He is small-boned and very finely featured: he resembles an MGM idea of a Romantic Poet doomed by consumption. He speaks in a rambling chant of soft-spoken clip phrases. With brows raised and lids lowered, he leans forward into your words.

The purpose of the dialog was to get Bob Dylan down as Bob Dylan. I believe it was also his purpose. It is far too easy to suggest listening to his records to know where he is because much cannot come through songs. And the part which remains hidden is just that part, by definition, which his public wants to see.

Unwillingly, Dylan has been shoved or extruded onto the podium for all Hipdom. Being a person aware of his fallibility and fragmentary perplexity—as well as of his freedom and the significance of individuality—it is hard for him to speak with certainty and weight. He constantly qualifies and insists on his ephemeral subjectivity, constantly underscores his right to privacy and unimportance. In doing so, he communicates a certain insecurity about his desired position in the fuzzy texture of his prefabricated and other-imaged life.

The taped interview lasted about 1-1/2 hours. We stayed in his room and then went to the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium with him. After the concert, we went to a party given by his agent. All during this time I became exposed to the incessant gluts of hungry folk who beset and nibble at him. It must be rare for him to shut the bathroom door without a voice cutting through, "Hey, why are you sitting there like that? What does it mean?"

His songs for this concert were a dappled barrel of easily accessible lyrics together with highly subtle and allusive strings of chanted jewels. The newer songs go quite deep in meanings and methods. Why the change towards this delicate structure of complexity? “My mistake was keeping my earlier stuff simple.”

Q: Do you feel you’re using more “urban imagery” than in the past? That your lyrics are becoming more sophisticated?

A: Well, I watch too much TV, I guess.

Q: What about Donovan?

A: I like everybody, I don’t want to be petty.

Q: A word for your fans?

A: The lamppost leans on folded arms...

Q: What do you think of the New Bob Dylan?

A: What’s your name?

Q: Dave Mopert.

A: Okay, what would you think if someone asked you what you think of the new Dave Mopert? What new Dave Mopert?

Q: Is Joan Baez still relevant?

A: She’s one of the most relevant people I know.

Q: Do you feel you’re living a real life?

A: What’s that mean? If I’m not living it, who is? And if I’m not, whose life am I leading? Who’s living mine? What’s that?

Q: Do you feel you belong to your public now?

A: No. I don’t have any responsibility to the people who are hung up on me. I’m only responsible for what I create—I didn’t create them.

Q: Has your success infringed on your personal life?

A: What personal life? Hey, I have none.

This sort of ping-pong continued about an hour before the interviewers left. Many hostilities and befuddlements had been formed and blurted and I’m sure he’ll be just as misquoted and little understood in the reports of this press set as in all others.

After seeing this typical interview, I realized how lucky I had been to speak with him so easily and so openly. I also realized how essentially meaningless this transcription must be. He lays out many attitudes and concepts which, in their precise articulation and directness, will strike the public as shocking and unique. However, his larger meaning is to be found in his material. To know precisely what he thinks of Donovan or what year he began writing songs is extraneous. To make him come out for “No War Toys” or anti-police brutality is a redundancy. Just listen to his songs.

However, we must shine flashlights down our hero’s mouths and count their cavities. With that rider, what follows is probably the most meaningfully candid interview Dylan has ever indulged in. I only hope it will give you the deep understanding of and respect for Dylan which I gained.

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