

How I Got Into Dylan

To explain this involves telling you how I first 'got into' Dylan. Perhaps you'll indulge this light 'fannish' introduction as a counterweight to the more academic piece that follows.[1] It begins when I was 14 or 15 with a friend to be, Neil Crawford, declaring his admiration for Bob Dylan and asking me what music I liked. I mentioned David Bowie, whose Ziggy Stardust and/or Aladdin Sane was filling the airwaves at the time. This brought a contemptuous response. I tried to defend my choice by telling him to look beyond the glam image to the lyrics. This made matters worse, the contempt level rose exponentially. Lyrical meaning and profundity, according to Neil, clearly were the preserve of this man called Bob Dylan. He spoke with such unswervable conviction that I resolved to find out more.

This was not the first time I had heard of Bob Dylan, but earlier memories are vague. I do remember a *Melody Maker* headline Dylan Digs Elton! I was at the time very fond of *Tumbleweed Connection* and was put off by the idea that the paper needed to praise Elton via this kind of endorsement. 'What does it matter what this person Dylan thinks of it?', I wondered. Oh boy, was I to learn! There must have been other times I had come across his name too, but it was the way Neil spoke that struck and stuck with me.

So the next time I was in the local library, I looked in the record section. Those were not so common in those days – libraries were still mainly for books, would you believe – and it was a very small selection; but they did have a Dylan and luckily for me it was a double! There was a kind of weird painting on the cover. I rushed home to play it.

So it was that *Self Portrait* became the first Dylan album I heard.

I cannot remember too much of what I thought about it; except that I was not bowled over to the extent Neil's words had made me anticipate! I liked the traditional Western songs and 'Belle Isle'. Before David Bowie and Elton John I had listened more to traditional Scottish music than anything else – apart from The Beatles and The Who's *Meaty Beaty Big And Bouncy*. This was not something I told my school friends, I can assure you, but I guess it did help me relate to something like 'Belle Isle'.

The conversation with Neil had made me pay attention to the name Dylan and it seemed he was everywhere. My sister's friends all knew him well; it was almost as though he was still a big star, but I could not find out anything he was doing in the music magazines. My sister even got someone a book on Dylan for his birthday. *Bob Dylan; A Retrospective* – I sneaked a look at it before it was wrapped up and it seemed to confirm everything Neil had said in spades. My sister brought a new boyfriend to the house and I told him I was listening to *Self Portrait*. He said it was OK but not anything near as good as the other albums Dylan had done. All of a sudden it seemed clear – I had got the wrong album. I was just unlucky. So I determined to get another. The library was not able to help this time; they had three Dylan albums, of which I had one and the other two were out. I had taped *Self Portrait* so I returned it and ordered the others. Then I waited until I had enough money to buy an album.

The next scene takes place in a record shop called Listen near Sauchiehall Street in Glasgow. Listen shops had a particular attraction – apart from the records themselves – they were deliciously dark and druggy places where the weirdest characters hung out. Drug busts eventually closed them down, if my memory serves me well, but they probably would not have survived the coming of the Megastore Monoliths in any case.

Anyway, disaster struck for me because LPs had just gone up in price. It was probably by some minuscule amount, but I had gone in whenever I had exactly enough money for an LP at the old prices and I did not have a penny more. I hung around the shop browsing the shelves in any case; having made the trip into the city centre I was not going to just go away. I don't think it occurred to me to go to any other record shop, it would have been just so uncool to shop anywhere other than Listen. This was a conviction held with a peculiarly teenage obsession (as opposed to all the obsessions I still have in middle age). I would buy at Listen or I would not buy at all.

Just as my interest was waning I came across a box of reduced items in a 'bargain bin' and, almost unbelievably, there was a smiling Bob Dylan looking out at me from an LP cover. I took it up and asked the guy behind the counter (he was all hair and teeth and looked like it was best for all concerned that he was confined to the darkest recesses of this already unlit and cloudy place) 'do you know if this is from before *Self Portrait*?' (I had been told Dylan's great stuff was earlier). 'Yeah man' he grunted (everybody still said Man at the end of every sentence).

So it was that *Nashville Skyline* became the first Dylan LP I bought and the second I ever heard.

My reaction to it was not greatly dissimilar to my reaction to *Self Portrait*. I liked it a bit more and fell in love with 'I Threw It All Away', but again it was far from what I expected. I made my dad listen to it (he lectured in language and literature) and told him 'this guy is supposed to be a great lyricist'. There wasn't much he could say but I remember him commenting after 'I Threw It All Away' that 'that one had something'.

So that was it, no epiphanies yet – but soon the library sent a note to say they had one of the Dylan albums I had ordered in now and were holding it for me. The note didn't say much – it didn't even seem to have a title. All it said

was: 'Bob Dylan. Dylan now being held for you.' I went in and got it the next day.

And that is how the album *Dylan* became the third Bob Dylan album I heard.

From sometime in 1973 to some point in 1974 I was introduced to this genius who has played such a role in my life via *Self Portrait*, *Nashville Skyline* and *Dylan*. Oh, and just to let you know, when the other library record came in it was, would you believe, *Pat Garrett and Billy The Kid*.^[2] As time passed I think I must have heard *Before The Flood* at some point too, but I certainly have no memory of *Planet Waves* or *New Morning*.

My whole impression of Dylan was about to explode into something totally different in any case. I bumped into Neil and told him how I had tried so hard with his Dylan guy and although I liked him well enough could not understand why there was such a fuss about him. Neil was in a dreamland: 'get the one that is just out- it is the best thing ever' was all he seemed to be saying over and over. I think this was the first time he had been out of his house in ages and he agreed saying it was because of this album and I must 'get the one that is just out- it is the best thing ever'. It was some record called *Blood On The Tracks*.

Before I could decide whether to try this, fate took a decisive hand. My mother was by now at university as a mature student and a friend of hers there, one Robert Charles, heard of my Dylan listening experience and lent her *A Rare Batch Of Little White Wonder* for me to tape. It completely blew my mind – all of it; the acoustic side as well as the sensational band sessions. In my naivety, I knew of no great acoustic/electric split, I just heard the voice I had been waiting all my life to hear on every track of this precious vinyl thing.

The sheer power of the music and the appealing, if mysterious, lyrics of the electric tracks were something totally outwith my previous experience, I'd never heard anything like it. A tired old phrase normally but literally true on this occasion. Life has never been the same since.

I knew from his voice – its always those uniquely communicative vocals that catch you first – and the sumptuous, joyful music that he was delving into deep 'truths' and this led me to instinctively believe that the lyrics portrayed profound insight. And this is what I always wanted to express, what those songs say to me (and I know they will, naturally, say many other things to other listeners). It's important though to know that before I even knew what they were saying to me lyrically, Bob Dylan had pierced my heart and soul. There and then I knew this was it forever, there'd be no going back, from now on the mid 60s classic sound was imprinted forever.

It is one of the most rewarding mysteries of art's effect on us. Here is Ted Hughes talking of the same thing in relation to hearing the poems of T.S. Eliot:

I prefer poems to make an effect on being heard, and I don't think that's really a case of them being simple because for instance Eliot's poems make a tremendous effect when you hear them, and when I first heard them they did, and when I was too young to understand very much about them they had an enormous effect on me, and this was an effect quite apart from anything that I'd call, you know, understanding, or being able to explain them, or knowing what was going on. It's just some sort of charge and charm and series of operations that it works on you, and I think quite complicated poetry, such as Eliot's, can do this on you immediately.^[3]

Bob Dylan's certainly did this 'on me', and this article is my attempt to share part of what those mysterious and powerful lyrics say to me now when I hear them; what I 'understand by them' now, in Hughes's terms. This understanding has multiplied the 'tremendous effect when I hear them' exponentially.

[1] Readers of *Freewheelin' Quarterly* will be familiar with this tale.

[2] Which is not to decry everything on these albums but they were so not what I was expecting.

[3] This is from a recording published as 'The Poet Speaks, No. 5', and is conveniently transcribed and reprinted in Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes. A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p.33.