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SYMPOSIUM - BOB DYLAN AND THE LAW

DYLAN AND THE LAST LOVE SONG OF THE AMERICAN LEFT

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Abstract

The reminiscences of an old man who had the joy of being a New York kid when an old American music form was transformed by the extraordinary efforts of a group of musicians who saw a new creative force that they thought could cause revolutionary social change. This article examines the impact of the friendship between Bob Dylan and Woody Guthrie on folk music and describes the political consciousness of the music.

KEYWORDS: Bob Dylan, Communist, American Folk music, Woody Guthrie

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*Honorable John M. Facciola**

I want to begin by thanking a great University for its contribution to my love of music.

When I was a fifteen-year-old kid and a student at Regis High School, the Jesuits did not think that the school day ended at 3:00 PM. Instead, they insisted that we drink from the astonishing cultural fountain that was and is New York City. It was at Fordham that I saw my first Shakespearean play and my first opera, presented by two companies that were amateur in name only. It makes sense that, fifty years later, I return to Fordham to talk about music.

I cannot pretend that what I am about to say is history supported by the traditional footnotes. Let it be, instead, reminiscences of an old man who had the joy of being a New York kid when an old American music form was transformed by the extraordinary efforts of a group of musicians who saw a new creative force that they thought could cause revolutionary social change. Much of it happened right under my nose in Greenwich Village, close to where our Italian-American family made its first home in, what was then, Little Italy.

Let me begin with a strange meeting between a desperately ill man, named Woody Guthrie, and a kid from Minnesota, then named Robert Zimmerman. Guthrie was near death from a genetic disease that had enfeebled him, and Zimmerman had come on a sacred pilgrimage to see him in a state hospital in New Jersey. What transpired between them is not really known, but it was such a transformative moment that a book for young children has now been written about it.¹

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1. GARY GOLIO, *WHEN BOB MET WOODY: THE STORY OF THE YOUNG BOB DYLAN* (2011).

The world knows that the kid named Robert Zimmerman would change his name to Bob Dylan. With the passage of time, the significance of the life of the other man has faded, but its influence on Dylan, and the rest of the generation that sang “folk music” in the 1960s is incalculable. Indeed, Dylan wrote a song, *Song to Woody*, that expressed his admiration for Guthrie in hero-worship terms.

Guthrie’s music, “folk music,” finds its roots in the music that emerged from the experience of rural America in its hymns, field hollers, and work songs. It is the antithesis of the slick Tin Pan Alley or Broadway song, with their orchestrations and catch-line choruses with simple rhymes—“If you knew Susie, like I knew Susie.” Instead, folk music is either a variation on the sort of hymn one would hear at a church or prayer meeting—captured so perfectly by the music in the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*—or pure narrative. If it was the latter, it was a simple melody based on a few chords in which the singer told a story. Thus, the first big “folk music” hit was *Tom Doolley*, a story told by a convict named Tom Dullah of why he must hang in the morning.

The tradition is, of course, an ancient one stretching all the way back to the French troubadours who sang of courtly love in medieval France. In the American tradition, however, it was not the songs of the court but of the farm, of the small town with a small church where most folks earned a meager living from an often unforgiving earth. The singer of the song is the wandering minstrel who moves from town to town like the wind, never staying anywhere long enough to be rooted in that soil. In Dylan’s tribute to Guthrie, Dylan starts by saying that he is a thousand miles from his home, and ends by announcing that he is leaving tomorrow. To be faithful to the tradition, the singer can never stay; he has to move on down the line to remain faithful to his calling.

Guthrie is the archetype: he was incapable of remaining in one place and his life was pure wanderlust. He drank too much, was rarely faithful, and often failed to support his family. Indeed, he had contempt for making money; he did not bother to copyright a single one of his hundreds of songs, although those royalties could have helped his family. Yet, while his life was perhaps not admirable, his music captured the narrative tradition of the wandering American minstrel.

We probably would not be as interested in Guthrie’s music as an introduction to Dylan’s had he continued telling corny jokes and singing songs about lost love. But Guthrie, like so many of his contemporaries, was deeply affected by the Dust Bowl and the Great Depres-

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sion. Those events, and the extreme poverty that came from them, seemed to Guthrie and his contemporaries to indicate that capitalism had destroyed itself and had to be replaced by a Marxist social and economic system in which the State owned the means of production. The Communist Party seemed to them to present the only hope of true economic equality. At the time, the American Left was enamored of the Party, and many joined it. We will never know whether Woody did. He was so disorganized and independent that he probably could not have joined a birthday party. But he certainly shared the Party's belief in the class struggle. The growth of the union movement and the organization of all workers were central to the Party's goals. Thus, Woody wanted to be singing not at the Rainbow Room in New York or a fashionable club in San Francisco, but in a union hall under the skeptical and careful eyes of company thugs and spies or in a camp of "Okies" displaced by the Dust Bowl to California. One thinks of Woody and Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and the magnificent photographs of the Farm Security Administration depicting the unbearable poverty of the rural poor during the Depression; these images come immediately to mind.

His music reflects this political consciousness. *This Land is Your Land* is Woody's answer to the jingoism and self-satisfaction that "God is on our side" that he thought was reflected in *God Bless America*. *Pastures of Plenty* reminds Americans that it is the back-breaking work of agricultural farm workers that brings them their sweet table wine. *Deportee* speaks of the cynical deportation of Mexican farm workers as soon as they had picked the California crops. On a brighter note, he actually made a buck when he was hired by a federal agency to extol the wonders of the Bonneville Dam—a classic example of a government project that surely was condemned as "socialist."

Woody was hardly alone in singing about social and political issues from the perspective of the American Left. The Lomax family, who collected much folk music that is now part of the Library of Congress's collection, recorded songs by a convict named Huddie Ledbetter, later known as "Leadbelly." His music condemned the refusal of a shipping company to permit Jack Johnson, the heavyweight champion, to board because of the color of his skin and mocked the refusal of a District of Columbia landlord to rent him a room for the same reason in *Bourgeois Blues*.

The most significant singers on the Left were a group that began as the "Almanac Singers" when Woody sang with them, and became "The Weavers." Ronnie Gilbert, Lee Hays, Fred Hellerman, and Pe-

ter Seeger—the Weavers—were in the heart of the American Left and sang from that heart about organizing unions and peace.

After the end of World War II and the rise of the Soviet Union as an implacable enemy, when Congress began to investigate the supposed Communist influence in the entertainment industry, Seeger, Hayes, and the Weavers were not spared. The interest of Congress in the entertainment industry flowed from an apparent perception that the Communists were using films, music, drama, and books as propaganda for the Communist line. It was also a wonderful way to get headlines and television coverage. How else could a Congressman actually get to see Marilyn Monroe up close, whose husband, the playwright Arthur Miller, was called before a congressional committee investigating Communist influence in the entertainment industry?

Seeger and Hayes were called before a congressional committee after being denounced by an informant as members of the Communist Party. They claimed their constitutional rights. Seeger was convicted of contempt, but was not imprisoned before his conviction was overturned.

It was cold comfort. In the meanwhile, he and the Weavers were “blacklisted,” i.e., subject to a *sotta voce* agreement amongst the people who ran the entertainment industry not to hire Communists or “fellow travelers.” The Weavers did not survive, and the controversy about them persisted for a long time. I can still recall, when I was in high school in the late 1950’s, seeing picketers from Young Americans for Freedom, a conservative group devoted to William F. Buckley and the National Review, picketing a concert hall in New York where Seeger was to perform.

Looking back on all of this, two phenomena are truly striking. Note, first of all, that all of the folk music speaking to a political or social issue does so from the Left, and even the extreme Left, of the American political spectrum. It had a political ethos that was unique to the American musical experience. Surely, if we were discussing the influence of folk music on Ralph Vaughn Williams’ music, we would not care a fig about Williams’ politics. But American folk music could justifiably brag about its political consciousness and its willingness to be used to accomplish political and social goals, irrespective of the consequences. This was all on the Left. I actually remember a guy who billed himself as a conservative folk singer. Given the ethos, and its leftish trend, he could have given a concert in a phone booth.

Second, the music mattered. It was important and engendered remarkable controversy for a handful of people. We had congressional

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hearings, denouncements of the music by editorials, and picketing when Pete Seeger performed. That is remarkable. Can you imagine picketers at a Barry Manilow concert?²

All of this, and especially Guthrie's life and music, have had a profound impact on Dylan in the persona he projects and his early music.

First, Dylan even sounds like Guthrie. I was familiar with Guthrie's music, and when I first heard Dylan, I would have sworn that Dylan was also from Oklahoma.

Second, as I pointed out when I talked about the song Dylan wrote honoring Guthrie, Dylan, like Guthrie, must disdain roots and obligations and keep wandering to fulfill his responsibility as a poet. Like Guthrie, Dylan, as a young man, had to keep moving, running from the constraints that a society corrupted by greed would impose.

Third, Dylan, when he speaks to political and social issues, comes at them from the well-established American folk music left. But there is an important difference. Guthrie pulled no punches when he attacked the capitalists he so despised. Nevertheless, *This Land is Your Land* is a hymn to America's physical beauty and a patriotic song in the truest sense. *Roll Columbia* praises a governmental public work and is optimistic about the future a dam will bring. Dylan's political songs, such as *Blowin' in the Wind*, *Only a Pawn in Their Game*, and *With God on Our Side*, are bitter and full of cynicism about the power of either people or politics to change. Guthrie and the Weavers were proud that they advanced a political agenda and an ideology in which they believed. Being labeled "Communists" or "Fellow Travelers" was a badge of honor. Dylan has contempt for all ideologies. Indeed, can you imagine anyone in possession of his senses labeling Dylan as an ideologue or accusing him of advancing somebody else's agenda?

Finally, like Guthrie, Dylan was drawn to Greenwich Village like a moth to a flame. Before it became posh, the Village was the home of the New York bohemians. Again, like Guthrie, Dylan could find a place to crash with fellow artists without fear or obligation. Lucky Dylan could then take a walk and, in the clubs on Bleecker and MacDougal Streets, hear Richie Havens, Peter, Paul and Mary, and Tom Paxton.

Dylan's carrying forth the Guthrie tradition, however, came to a sudden halt. Now, I appreciate that there are nearly as many books about what happened to Dylan at a certain Newport Folk Festival as

2. Of course, if they loved good music . . .

there are about the causes of the Civil War. The one thing that I am comfortable in saying is that some people attempted to stop Dylan from being accompanied by, and accompanying himself with, electric guitars. The most unattractive aspect of the revival of American folk music in the 1960's was its insistence on "purity." An acoustic guitar was good, but an electric one was not. A song you wrote, no matter how beautiful, was not authentic folk music. A song passed down, whose author was probably unknown, was folk music. Dylan blew up that notion, along with a lot of other things, but believe it or not, his use of an electric band was considered some kind of treason by folk artists. Indeed, while I was not at Newport, I do remember the *New York Times* report of a concert Dylan gave in Forest Hills. The report explained that, after he did an acoustic set, and the electronic instruments were brought onto the stage, the audience booed. Hypocrites that they were, they soon began singing along with Dylan when he sang *Like a Rolling Stone*.

Whatever the changes and reasons, from that point on, Dylan left the American folk tradition behind. As other participants at this conference will point out, Dylan remains concerned about inequality, race, and its impact on criminal justice, for example, but he never really returned to the themes and musical styles of Guthrie and the Weavers. Indeed, I saw a television interview with Joan Baez, who, after all, introduced Dylan to the world, in which she noted, with a trace of bitterness, that Dylan last wrote, what she called, a protest song in 1963.

Dylan is hardly alone. While the generation of American singer-songwriters of the 1960's sometimes speaks to political issues, and surely sing their songs at political rallies and anti-war demonstrations, they never really returned to the lyrical and ideological traditions of the Weavers and Guthrie. Indeed, I am struck by how many of them never record or sing what I would call a political song. I cannot think of one, for example, by Paul Simon, Carole King, or James Taylor.³ Unfortunately, the genre has all but died. The music shows up every so often on PBS fundraising specials, where it is milked to get a few bucks out of geezers like me.

History is cruel and mocks illusions savagely. Thanks to books like Tim Synder's *Bloodlands*, we know that the Soviet Union under Sta-

3. Springsteen's tribute to Seeger and the folk tradition in his album *The Seeger Sessions* is a glorious exception. Bruce Springsteen, *WE SHALL OVERCOME: THE SEEGER SESSIONS* (Columbia Records 2006). Note that the last time I saw him, Springsteen ended his concert with a Weavers song.

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lin was a chanel house where hundreds of thousands of people were killed and where every strand of liberty and freedom was mercilessly obliterated by a fearsome police state. That, for a time, well-meaning people thought it was a workers' paradise, worthy of emulation in America, is, with the benefit of hindsight, horrifying.

As a decade, the 1960s had its own style of ironic mockery. In the early 1960's, young people formed a circle, held hands, and sang *This Land is Your Land* or *Blowing in the Wind*. In November 1963, John F. Kennedy was assassinated. I graduated from college in 1966, and shortly thereafter, two of my classmates, both Marines, were killed in Vietnam. I was in law school in 1968 and recall being in a class when many police cars with sirens blaring came down the street. We opened a window (you could do that then), and realized that nearby businesses were on fire in the riots that followed the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1969, the year of my graduation, the woman I would marry had a party for me and my classmates to celebrate our last exam. It was not much of a party. That morning brought the news that one of her classmates, another Marine, had been killed in Vietnam. His wife, my wife's roommate, was bearing his child. Standing in a circle and singing to achieve brotherhood and peace—I am afraid not.

It is obvious to mock the American folk tradition, and that was done hysterically in the film *A Mighty Wind*. But before we dismiss the quick flare-up and rapid departure of folk music as naïve, let me make a case for its contribution to American music, including Dylan. Unless you are my age, you have no idea how bad American pop music was in the late 1950's. I assure you that when we listened to the radio (people did that then), it was not to Ellington, Basie, or the songs of Cole Porter. Pop music was an endless stream of identical songs, occasionally interrupted by novelty songs. I remember how delighted I was when Elvis's raunchy *Hound Dog* devoured a hideous song called *How Much Is that Doggie in the Window?* Unless you knew how bad the music was, you could not appreciate how beautiful a breath of fresh air folk songs were. They returned to the most fundamental human literary form: they told a story to people who, like me, were dying to be told a story. In the most fundamental sense, the American folk music tradition, revived, liberated Dylan and a generation from conforming to the existing notion of popular music. Instead, they were permitted to tell a story, even if that story was about their own consciousness, perception, and feelings, and did not have a distinct political theme—popularity and record sales be damned. Since then, and for many years, Dylan has done just that—singing

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what he wants to sing and probing who he is and the world he inhabits. He also keeps traveling. Old Woody Guthrie would be proud of him.