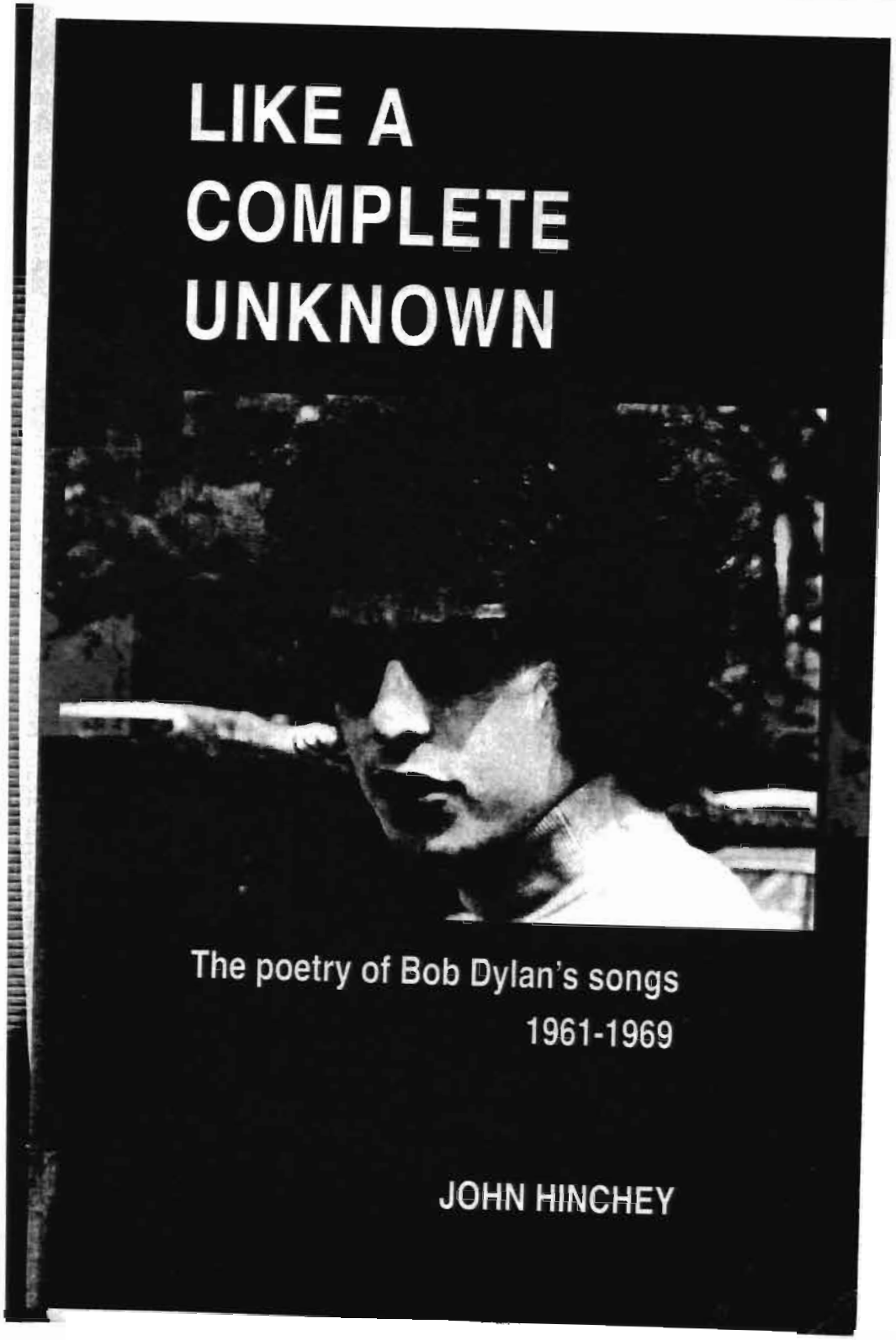

1

Like a Rolling Stone

No More Mr. Nice Guy

"Like a Rolling Stone" re-ignited Bob Dylan's career. By his own account, he had been ready to quit. In May 1965, just turned 24, Dylan returned home from an apparently triumphant British tour in utter defeat. He was the champion of the folk world–indeed, he had made folk a champion in the pop world–but his crown weighed on him like a badge of imprisonment. He had won a world-wide audience, but his audience was strangling him with adulation. The "voice of his generation," he reflected his audience in the visionary mirror of his songs, and in the answering mirror of its enraptured idolatry, he saw himself debased with a certain alienating majesty. He hated them. And he hated himself for allowing himself to play along.

His hatred began pouring out on the plane ride home in page after page of "vomit" directed at his tormentors. Dylan had always been a good hater, but this was something else, a hatred so pure and so uncannily knowing it could make even "Masters of War" seem a mere fit of bad temper. Perhaps it was because the object of his venom had never before been so close, so inseparable from his most intimate sense of himself. Oddly, it wasn't the self-hatred in the mix that upped the ante.

(Retrospective self-hatred can even be a bracing comfort–witness "My Back Pages.") No, the element of self-hatred was important only because it closed the back door. There would be no escape.

The novelty of the situation was that for the first time, Dylan found himself hating what he also loved: the very idea of an audience. Like every performer, Dylan needs an audience, not just as a pretext for performing but as a tacit collaborator whose anticipatory openness serves as a kind of midwife to the performance. But by mid-1965, for various reasons, Dylan had lost confidence in his audience's good faith. This crisis was made even more acute, I suspect, because Dylan's rapidly developing creative instincts as a performer were outstripping his own courage to follow his muse. As Paul Williams has helped all of us understand, Dylan eventually developed an aesthetic of performance as an exploration of its own moment, which is always unknown, harboring surprise. But until the crisis his disastrous 1965 tour provoked, neither Dylan nor his audience–despite his pretensions otherwise–seem to have been prepared to abandon a notion of performance as a culturally conservative rite, a demonstration of the known.

Nevertheless, when he felt his audience was turning its back on his deeper instincts, Dylan thought of giving up performing in favor of the cloister of the written page, where the audience never intrudes. But it was already too late for that. His creative spirit had long since cast its lot with the performing muse. He couldn't just walk away from his audience: his hatred held him hostage.

So he poured out his hatred, somehow transmuting the vomited mess into a song that saved his career. After writing it, he abruptly abandoned his dalliance with conventional literary forms–written poetry, prose fiction, plays–re-committed himself to his performing muse, and never looked back.

II

"Like a Rolling Stone" opens with a diabolically feline explosion of homicidal rage:

Once upon a time
you dressed so fine
Threw the bums a dime
in your prime
didn't you?
People'd call
say beware doll
You're bound to fall
you thought they were all
kiddin' you!
You used to laugh about
everybody that was hanging out
Now you don't talk so loud
now you don't seem so proud
About having to be
scrounging
for your next meal

The moral drama sketched here is familiar enough; indeed, it is the quintessential myth of the ethos we call the 60s. The contrast is between those who live vulnerably in the moment and those who rely on social status to insulate themselves from our common existential nakedness. It's easy to imagine how Dylan would have identified his audience with the phonies, but what made him think they had already gotten their comeuppance, that they had already been knocked off their high horse and knew it? The answer is, he didn't. But he meant to change that.

The song's opening scenario, that is, is pure wish-fulfillment, a sadistic fantasy tossed out as a prophetic gambit: the song it opens is the only scene of an imagined degradation his audience suffers the moment it submits to the song. "Once upon a time" is shattered only by the "now" of composition or performance, a "now" the audience corroborates by listening.

To lash back at his smugly admiring tormentors in this way must have felt awfully good, but in itself, revenge would not have been enough. It would have made a thrilling valedictory, perhaps, but there

was no future in it. It changed nothing.

But something was changed. Dylan had stumbled onto a new kind of song, a new kind of poetry that liberated him from his audience's transfixing expectations. And he found it in words likely to make a conventional poet wince: "didn't you?" These words are not metrical filler, nor are they merely a set-up for their snarling rhyme. The question they ask is not–in the ordinary sense–merely rhetorical. Dylan means the question, though it's possible he didn't notice that himself, since so far as I know, no poet before him had ever so asked a question. Whatever he thought he was doing, Dylan had done something quite original, something that opened a whole world of possibilities for a poet who wrote songs to be performed before a live audience: he kidnapped his listeners from their seats and put them–as listeners–in his songs.

At the end of "Talkin' World War III Blues," Dylan had promised his audience that "I'll let you be in my dream, if I can be in yours." In "Like a Rolling Stone," he finds a form that finally fulfills that promise. But since his relationship with his audience has lost its innocence, it comes off not as a promise but as a threat: "If I have to be in your dream, then you're gonna be in mine."

"Didn't you?": the key to the whole song is that Dylan actually listens for an answer. The answer he hears, of course, is an imagined response, but it has a real effect. The answer Dylan imagines–to a serial questioning that culminates in the sadistic "How does it feel" chorus–changes his perception of "you," a change that in turn alters his own mood.

(I hereafter refer to "You" simply as you, without quotation marks. If that makes you, my reader, uncomfortable, well, that's what the song intends. I suppose I should apologize, however, for allowing myself to be forced into the role of the singer challenging you.)

In the second verse, Dylan's rage is suffused with a complicating compassion for your pain as "Miss Lonely," a compassion that blossoms into the mingled pity and terror with which he contemplates your incredulous encounter with "the vacuum," an unsheltering vacancy or emptiness at the heart of reality:

You said you'd never compromise
with the mystery tramp but
now you realize
He's not selling any alibis
as you stare into the
vacuum of his eyes
And say,
"Do you wanna
make a deal?"

The "mystery tramp" is in some sense Dylan himself, but the "mystery tramp" is not an alter ego, not even a visionary alter ego like the final verse's "Napoleon in rags." He is something finer–and spookier–than that. The "mystery tramp" is what Romantic mythologies call the "divine self," the figure Whitman called "the Real Me." It is the part of Dylan that is evoked by his art, a self into which Dylan the performer (if he is lucky) disappears. The song subjects the singer's ego to the same transforming ordeal to which it subjects you. Thus, to the extent that the "mystery tramp" is the agent of Dylan's revenge–or what starts out as revenge before turning into something more interesting–it is a revenge exacted upon himself as well. (That's one of the reasons the song's sadistic current is profoundly masochistic as well.)

And it is more than mere revenge. The second time around, the chorus has gone beyond sadism. The words haven't changed, but their meaning has–even on the page–because the context has changed. This is not as novel, or outrageous, a notion as it may first seem. Just as a word can change its meaning with a change in context, so can groups of words. That's the main reason, I think, that interpretation remains such an inextricably subjective enterprise: our sense of the right context is always chosen from a theoretically endless array of conceivable contexts.

When I first listened to "Like a Rolling Stone," blaring incessantly for months from the cafeteria jukebox in college, the beginning of the second chorus always seemed to be the place I stopped merely listening to the song and got excited by it. It's here that the song becomes something more than superb satire–like "Tombstone Blues"–and explodes

into a realm beyond words, beyond music, beyond all sense, enveloping itself in the intoxicating accents of pure imagination.

The second time round the chorus inevitably strikes you as the voice of the "mystery tramp" himself, an invitation to enter a harrowing inner world uncompromised by the "alibis" of social and even psychological identity, to re-connect with the freedom of a "vacuum," or nothingness, deep within you and become a "complete unknown," even (or especially) to yourself.

The third verse represents another shift in Dylan's mood that once again coincides with a change in his sense of you. His response suggests you have accepted the chorus's offer too greedily, mistaking an escape from society's false identities for an escape from human relations and responsibilities. This verse suggests that the singer fears you may think you have been able to get away with making some kind of "deal" to keep your identity intact, after all.

But not only have you not escaped your human connections, suddenly your immediate relationship–with this interrogating voice– presses upon you with a discomfitingly knowing intimacy. For the first time your social identity is characterized as that of a patron of artists and entertainers, and your present crime as a betrayal of that relationship. This verse is animated by a sense that you owe an apology to all the "jugglers and clowns" (including the one singing this song). Indeed, you and the singer may owe each other an apology, for the double-edged opening couplet blends snarling indignation with self-implicating images of erotic degradation. "Did tricks for you" and "get your kicks for you" suggest a sado-masochistic circuit that links your voyeurism with his prostituting exhibitionism.

The image of Miss Lonely in her "chrome horse" with her "diplomat" and his "Siamese cat" has always struck me as a bit overcooked, but the diplomat himself is a wonderfully apt metaphor for the way the conventions of polite society (i.e., you buy the ticket, I put on the show) covertly function as antisocial mechanisms that enable us to hold each other at arm's length, as foreigners. But this diplomatic immunity is a soul-killing bargain, as Dylan points out. His tone here fuses disdainful

cruelty with a compassionate generosity that implicitly offers recovery of a self beyond the reach of "everything he could steal." This time round the chorus carries the same meaning but the opposite feeling as the first time: to be a "rolling stone" is to reclaim a sense of shame–of the boundaries of your own being–as the mark of your common humanity.

The fourth verse opens with an assumption of an achieved complicity between Dylan and you. The "princess on the steeple" is an image of the "once upon a time" fairy-tale identity you were still clinging to when the song opened. You still have your "diamond ring," a symbol not so much of wealth as of sanctioned social identity, but Dylan now assumes you have so little attachment to it that you will readily "pawn" it. He also assumes that you are now challenged rather than "amused" by "Napoleon in rags": you are now prepared to recognize him as a fellow (and rival) emperor of "nothing." Dylan's "nothing" is an Emersonian poverty that is synonymous with spiritual wealth, the name for a freedom ("nothing to lose") that is decidedly not the mere "nothing *left* to lose" (emphasis added) of Kris Kristofferson's "Me and Bobby McGee." Dylan's freedom entails not a loss of identity but an immunity from his own identities: a capacity to own things without being owned by them that takes the form of a readiness to "pawn" anything and everything, to divest and re-invest an established identity at will.

I said that the fourth verse opens with an assumption of an achieved complicity between Dylan and you, but that is not quite accurate. Or its accuracy depends on what you mean by "Dylan." By this point, the singer–a fellow human just like you–has all but entirely disappeared, to reappear presently as "Napoleon in rags." The voice in the fourth verse belongs to the "mystery tramp," the song's presiding genius, who begins by offering some pointed advice and then re-introduces the imperious voice of the singer as a fellow character within your narrative. Finally, the mystery tramp's divine voice shifts to a tone of visionary exhortation:

Go to him now he calls you, you can't refuse
when you ain't got nothing
you got nothing to lose

You're invisible now
you got no secrets
to conceal

The song reaches its climax here, in the transcendental ecstasy of a visionary "now" that breaks the spell of the rage-filled "once upon a time" out of which the song arose. This "now" is identical to the emergence of your "invisible" self from the social covering that has made its nakedness a "secret." To be "invisible," in the sense intended here, is a radically dialectical notion, an appearance that is also a disappearance, and though it invites endless meditation, I'll just say that it seems to be Dylan's ultimate image for an authentic being-in-the-world. "You're invisible now," then, is a statement equivalent to "I see you," except it finesses the rude self-consciousness of such bad language.

This visionary "now" is thrown out as the consummation of an encounter between singer and listener–Dylan and you–on the common ground provided by the song. That is, "Go to him now, he calls you" is a fairly transparent trope whose literal meaning is "Come to me now, I call you." But Dylan doesn't say "I," not in this line, not anywhere in the song. He eschews the first-person pronoun throughout because this is your song, and you inevitably encounter him as "him," in the third person, or specifically (as it turns out) as "Napoleon in rags." Your sense of him as "I" is necessarily a leap of faith, an imagining grounded in your sense of yourself as "you." Similarly, his sense of you as "you" is grounded in his sense of himself as "I." In an important sense, then, Dylan has been saying "I" all along. Like any other maker of fictions, Dylan can address his fiction of "you" only because–and only insofar as–he can see you in himself. You are, first and foremost, an imagined "you," a fictional eye for Dylan's "I."

"You," in sum, are Dylan's most daring and transgressive trope for himself: he supplants his own audience by finding it within himself. Perhaps this is just a way of saying that, above and beyond the ecstatic release of his own truest voice in singing the song, Dylan enjoys your ecstasy at the climax of the song at least as much as you do. (Or I should say, as you might, if you have managed to keep pace throughout the song with his exacting imagination of you.) "You're invisible now" also announces an apotheosis of the singer's desire. The final chorus carries the same meaning it did after the second verse, but what once loomed as a forbidding ordeal is now joyously solicited–by the "mystery tramp" in both Dylan and you, both singer and listener–as a revelation of a naked self beyond identity, beyond personality, beyond its own creations.

As an image of self, the "rolling stone" transposes the self-cleansing nothingness of Emerson's "transparent eye-ball" from the realm of contemplation to the realm of social intercourse, while also imbuing the Emersonian divine self with an unmistakably Dylanesque negative theology. This is Emerson in his *Nature*: "I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God." This (in essence) is the Dylan who first discloses himself in "Like a Rolling Stone": "I become a rolling stone. I have nothing. Home is wherever I go. I travel the streets everywhere, inscrutable and self-sufficient."

III

"Like a Rolling Stone" is a song about freedom, but then, in one way or another, so is every song Dylan would write until the 70s, when marriage usurped its place as his central imaginative obsession. But "Like a Rolling Stone" dramatically expanded the scope of his freedom as a performing artist because it showed him a way to retrieve his freedom from his audience without simply abandoning that audience.

Dylan retrieves his freedom, as I have argued, by putting his audience into his song. What this means pragmatically is that he must find a voice for that audience within himself. "Like a Rolling Stone" thus emerges from Dylan's dialogue with himself, a dialogue in which "you" figure as an evil twin he cannot expel but must forever confront.

But this "you" also still carries the sense of other people, of external listeners, real or imagined. Otherwise, it wouldn't have resolved Dylan's impasse with his audience, and you would not feel (as we all do) invited into the song. Moreover, without the driving force of his

passion–his hatred–for his audience, I doubt that Dylan would have found the courage to ferret out his inner demons. I suspect, in fact, that Dylan had been projecting onto his audience–not that they didn't offer an easy target–his own failures of nerve. (After all, during that 1965 British tour, even after he had released a whole album side of rock-'n'roll, he was still playing artistically and commercially safe acoustic shows to adoring audiences.)* But when he hauled his audience into the court of his imagination, he found their crimes–surprise!-in his own divided imagination.

This psychologizing, I concede, is rank speculation, and I certainly don't claim either that Dylan understood his breakthrough in these terms, or that we need these terms to understand this song. But I do believe you'll find that this point of view will come in handy when you try to talk about "Like a Rolling Stone," and I do know that what he had done in creating "Like a Rolling Stone" opened his art to a whole other level. In the short run, it exploded into a year of performances that we might retrospectively dub the Mystery Tramp Tour, a series of concerts (culminating in the legendary 1966 tour of the British Isles) built around several other new songs that also interrogated "you" with a shamanistic wit at once lethal and frightfully tender.

Dylan's Mystery Tramp persona burned out rather quickly. But the artistic discoveries that fueled its peculiar confrontational intensities have had a lasting impact on Dylan's career. For one thing, whenever Dylan has faced–or wanted to provoke–controversy with his audience, he has come up with a new batch of material dominated by you-baiting second-person songs. He returned to this form–with a vengeance–in the late 70s, at the beginning of his "born-again" phase: on *Slow Train Coming* the mystery tramp is Jesus, and you are usually non-believers–within and without. In many of these songs, however, the I-you

* Carolyn Sumner's "The Ballad of Dylan and Bob" (*The Telegraph* 14, pp. 38-52) is a superb discussion of the strain of self-interrogation in the relationship between the fictive "I" and "you" in Dylan's songs. The pseudonymous Hugh Dunnett's "Weary Hugh Tonight" (*The Telegraph* 23, pp. 92-97) explores the same theme in "Like a Rolling Stone."

rhetoric is turned upside down, in a way that reflects Dylan's religious experience of grace as an intervening "you," so that you are often either the Divine Self Himself or one of his angels. Dylan returned to this song form again in the late 80s–in the early years of a so-called Never-Ending Tour, when he might perhaps have begun to wonder whether anything more than habit kept him or his audience listening. For instance, the *Oh Mercy* song "What Was It You Wanted?" is a baffled elegy–both for love and for the ties that bind performer and audience–that fuses Dylan's old confrontational ferocity with a sublimely weathered mournfulness.

What Dylan discovered in writing "Like a Rolling Stone" was what might be called the essential dialogic nature of his own creative identity. Interestingly, he seems not to have realized what he discovered until a couple of years later. As he told his first biographer, Anthony Scaduto, it was only in writing the songs for *John Wesley Harding* that he "discovered that when I used words like 'he' and 'it' and 'they' and talking about other people, I was really talking about nobody but me. . . You see I hadn't really known before that I was writing about myself in all those songs."*

The force of this insight informs even songs that don't rely on projected second-person points of view. Consider, for instance, another *Oh Mercy* song, "What Good Am I?" I would submit that the fundamental meaning of this song would be the same had he written it as "What Good Are You?" Indeed, had he written it that way, he would have made explicit an I-you dialogue that is central to what he did write: a self-that-questions addressing a self-that-is-questioned, who plays dumb. A song that asked "What Good Are You?" would lack the overt rhetoric of self-questioning–a rhetoric that is crucial to its tone of moral bafflement–but the reality of self-questioning–the reality of the humbled spiritual yearning the song expresses–arises from something deeper than its superficial rhetoric. There are lots of bad songs pretending to express moral humility–Dylan's own "My Back Pages" springs to mind–and

* Anthony Scaduto, *Bob Dylan*, p. 286

they are bad because they are hypocritical in the literal sense of the word: the morally superior questioning "I" overwhelms the cross-examined "me," who is little more than a straw man for the questioner's implicit assertion of redemption. "What Good Am I?" persuades because it does not cast out the questioned "I" but affirms it as an inevictable part of the questioner's identity.

In Dylan's most characteristic songs you can almost always substitute "I" for "you" or "you" for "I" without changing their essential meaning. Sometimes, performing this exercise helps to break the spell of narrowly (and misleadingly) literal interpretations. Imagine, for instance, that Dylan had written "Is My Love in Vain?" or "You Want Me" or "You Don't Believe Me (She Acts Like We Already Have Met)." Changing the pronouns changes the point of view, but after "Like a Rolling Stone," point of view in Dylan's songs is almost always comparatively superficial, because he is always, as he says in "Where Are You Tonight?," "fighting with [his] twin, that enemy within."

Before "Like a Rolling Stone" Dylan is less consistent. "My Back Pages," for instance, is a song that seems to announce a new maturity beyond the crudities of "good" and "bad." But the problem with this manifesto is that it tries to disown Dylan's moralizing impulses rather than to transform them. For instance, "Masters of War," one of his greatest "finger-pointing" songs, defines "good" and "bad" with a prophetic authority undiminished by the recantations of "My Back Pages." But "Masters of War" also tells us more than "My Back Pages" does about the nature of the self-righteousness Dylan needed to outgrow: his lurid eagerness to see the war profiteers dead and buried is an anxious defense against recognizing anything of himself in an adversary whom his imagination, knowing better, nonetheless addresses as "you." Ironically, less than a year after writing "Masters of War," Dylan got himself into a heap of trouble when he accepted an award for his civil rights work by telling his audience that he saw something of himself in Lee Harvey Oswald.

The lessons of "Like a Rolling Stone" also profoundly affected Dylan's approach to performance. His deliverance from the tyranny of

his audience also had a liberating effect on his relationship to the songs he sings. It's a cliché among Dylan fans that he never sings a song the same way twice, but that has not always been the case. Early in his career, Dylan's singing was conventional in one important way: you always felt he was concerned mainly to do right by the song. His sense of what is "right" was highly idiosyncratic, but his performance always seemed to be at the service of some demand the song made upon his imagination. And composed songs–even (or maybe especially) one's own–are full of demands that impose all sorts of constraints upon the creative freedom of performance.

They impose constraints upon performance to the extent that the performer regards them as establishing standards of expression he must meet, as something he must live up to. And in retrospect, Dylan's early performances do sound like the training exercises of a young genius expanding his powers by absorbing the models against which he measured them. Indeed, his powers blossomed so rapidly that he quickly outgrew the exercise equipment he inherited and began inventing his own, but he still approached the performance of his own songs the same way he had approached traditional material–as models of an excellence to which he was still only aspiring. Thus, the original *Bringing It All Back Home* recording of "It's Alright Ma"–the song in which he announced he has "nothing, Ma, to live up to"–gains a certain piquancy from the way his text-bound singing, almost reverentially literary, belies the text's irresistibly persuasive assertion of independence.

After "Like a Rolling Stone" and the subsequent 1965-1966 tour, Dylan rarely sounds like he's seeking an imaginable perfection; in fact, the better he knows a song, the more he sings it as if he's sounding the unknown–even though the lyrics and the basic musical structures he performs remain composed, not improvised. The difference between the original recording of "It's Alright Ma" and any number of the live versions of the song I've heard in the past two decades is the difference between a precocious youth who knows more than he can yet do and a mature artist delighting in the confidence that even he doesn't know what he's going to do until he does it. He knows what he's going to say,

but he doesn't yet know how it's going to feel when he says it.

Dylan is able to sing with this kind of freedom, I would suggest, because in writing "Like a Rolling Stone," he had learned to find whomever he is singing to or for or about within himself. He had learned that his relationship to whatever song he is singing could be realized as a version of his dialogue with himself. And any tension in this relationship–as in his relationship with his audience–would be transformed from an obstacle to performance into one of its prime resources.

Dylan is an artist who is energized by conflict–with his audience, with his material, with himself. But he is even more fundamentally energized by something beyond distinctions between conflict and cooperation, if not beyond good and evil. Let's call it engagement, and the engagement that energizes Dylan is engagement with what he has to be able to call "you"–something or someone, that is, that answers him and that he can answer back. His initial success brought him an audience that answered him with an enthusiasm that must have exceeded even his wildest dreams. But it responded in a way that inevitably seemed to exclude him from the conversation. Applause turned him into an icon and turned the stage into a museum. The air up there was getting musty enough to make a feller sneeze.

"Like A Rolling Stone" is the sneeze heard 'round the world. In writing it Dylan stumbled onto a formula that opened "the language that he used" to his deepest intuitions about himself and his relationships with his audience and his art. He discovered that he could address you by talking to himself, and vice versa. He discovered, in short, a way to get himself and his audience under each other's skin. "Are you hard on them because you want to torment them, or because you want to change their lives and make them know themselves?" Dylan was asked during the legendary San Francisco press conference in December, 1965. "I want to needle them," came the impish reply.*

* "Bob Dylan '65: Meeting the Press," transcribed in *Rolling Stone Rock 'n' Roll Reader*, p. 216.

2

Ain't Too Big to Tell

Dylan's Early Songs

Bob Dylan began writing songs when he was still a child, but "Song to Woody" is really his first song. The earliest of the two original songs on his eponymous first LP, it was the first song he kept and, as Dylan told a radio interviewer in 1984, "the first song I ever wrote that I performed in public."* In many ways, it is also his most directly autobiographical song, since it is a song about writing one's first real song. Not surprisingly, it also turns out to be a final homage to the folk tradition that nourished him, and a dramatization of the process by which, in making that tradition his own, Dylan both carries it forward in himself and leaves it behind.

"Song to Woody" opens with a definition of the psychological site of its own origin. "Out here a thousand miles from my home/Walkin' a road other men have gone down," Dylan imagines himself a displaced person, a follower in other men's footsteps. But this mood–at once reverential and incipiently anxious–doesn't last for long. He covers his confusion so quickly we barely have a chance to hear it in his voice, and he covers it with an unconscious sleight-of-mind that seems to me to reveal one of the fundamental imaginative needs that defines him as artist:

* Bernard Kleinman, "Dylan on Dylan," in Benson, *The Bob Dylan Companion*, p. 33.