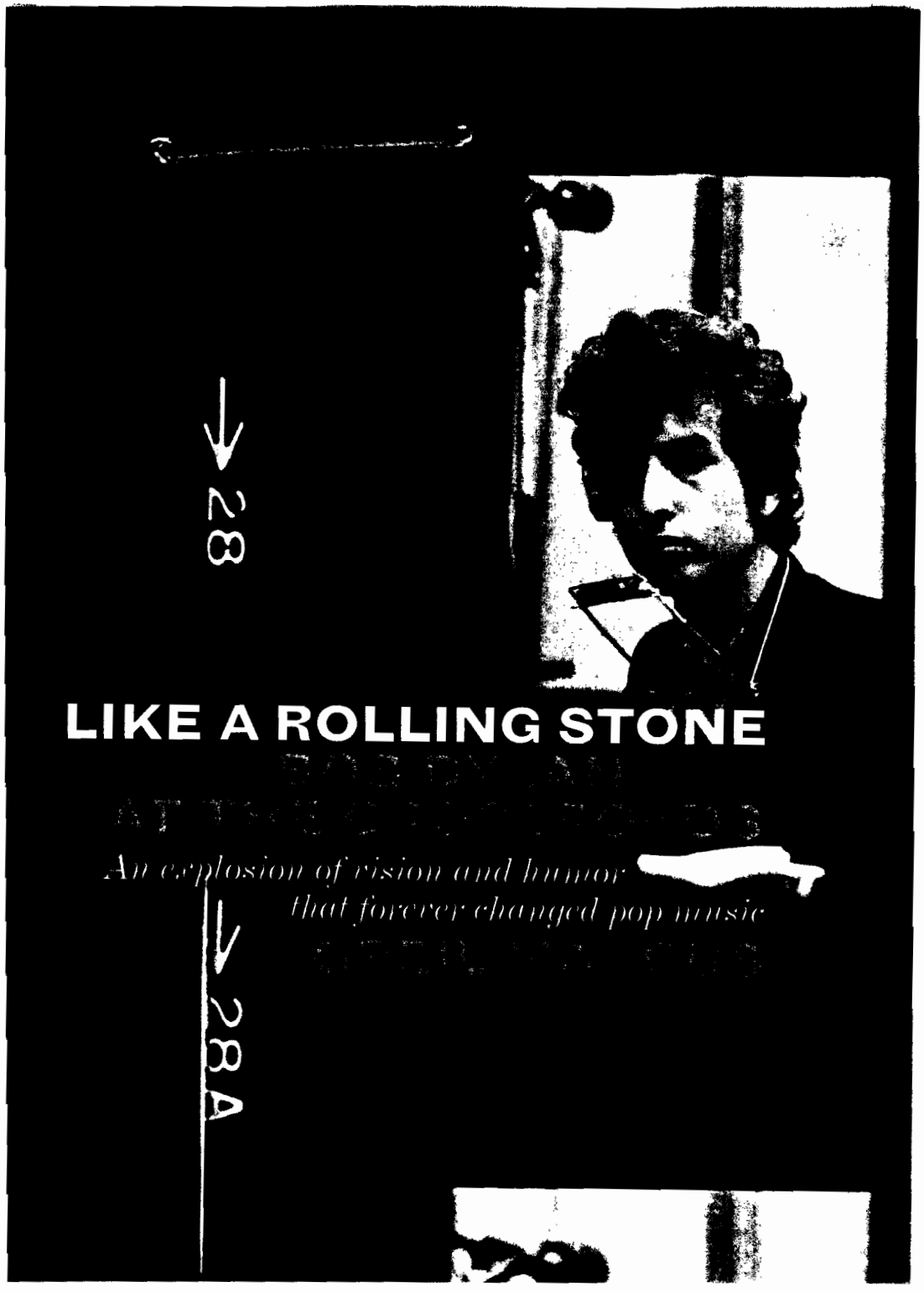
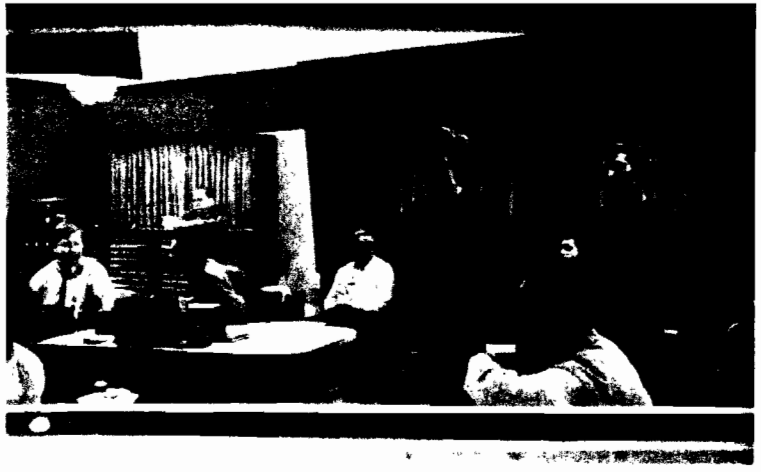


LIKE A ROLLING STONE

Bob Dylan at the Crossroads

GREIL MARCUS

PublicAffairs
New York



Playback: from left to right, Roy Halee, Pete Duryea (at rear), Tom Wilson, Albert Grossman, Bob Dylan, Vinnie Fusco (at rear), Sandy Speiser (foreground), Danny Kalb

Like a Rolling Stone

Once upon a time you dressed so fine
Threw the bums a dime, in your prime
Didn't you?
People call, say beware doll, you're bound to fall, you
thought they were all
A-kiddin' you
You used to
Laugh about
Everybody that was
Hangin' out
Now you don't
Talk so loud
Now you don't
Seem so proud
About havin' to be scrounging
Your next meal

How does it feel?
How does it feel

To be without a home
Like a complete unknown
Like a rolling stone?

Aw you've
Gone to the finest school alright Miss Lonely but you know
you only used to get
Juiced in it
Nobody's ever taught you how to live out on the street
And now you're gonna
Have to get
Used to it
You say you 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 want to
Make a deal?

How does it feel?
How does it feel?
To be on your own

With no direction home
A complete unknown
Like a rolling stone

Ah, you
Never turned around to see the frowns
On the jugglers and the clowns when they all did
Tricks for you
Never understood that it ain't no good
You shouldn't
Let other people
Get your
Kicks for you
You used to ride on a chrome horse with your
Diplomat
Who carried on his shoulder a
Siamese cat
Ain't it hard
When you discover that
He really wasn't
Where it's at
After he took from you everything
He could steal?

How does it feel?
How does it feel
To have you on your own

No direction home
Like a complete unknown
Like a rolling stone

Ahhhhhhhh—
Princess on the steeple and all the
Pretty people they're all drinkin' thinkin' that they
Got it made
Exchanging all precious gifts
But you better
Take your diamond ring
You better pawn it, babe
You used to be
So amused
At Napoleon in rags
And the language that he used
Go to him now, he calls you, you can't refuse
When you ain't got nothin'
You got
Nothing to lose
You're invisible now, you got no secrets
To conceal

How does it feel
Ah, how does it feel
To be on your own
With no direction

Home
Like a complete unknown
Like a rolling stone

As sung by Bob Dylan, New York City, 16 June 1965. Six minutes and six seconds. Produced by Tom Wilson. Engineered by Roy Halee, with Pete Duryea, assistant engineer. Michael Bloomfield, guitar; Bob Dylan, rhythm guitar and harmonica; Bobby Gregg, drums; Paul Griffin, piano; Al Kooper, organ; Bruce Langhorne, tambourine; Joe Macho, Jr., bass guitar. Released as Columbia 45 43346 on July 20. First entered *Billboard* Hot 100 July 24. Highest chart position reached: number 2, September 4. Number one that week: the Beatles, "Help."

This and the following photographs from the first day of sessions for "Like a Rolling Stone," 15 June 1965, taken by Don Hunstein, Columbia Records. Here: Bob Dylan at the piano, with lyrics, page after page.

Prologue

In Columbia Records Studio A on 15 June 1965, the singer is trying to find his way into his song, plinking notes on the piano. There's a feeling of uplift, dashed as soon as he begins to sing. His voice sounds as if it's just come back from the dry cleaners three sizes too small. He forces a few random notes out of his harmonica. The 3/4 beat is painful, weighing down the already sway-backed melody until it falls flat on the ground. The organist pushes his way into the music, like a bystander at an accident determined to do something to help, no matter how hopeless: *Are you all right?* The tune dries up after a minute and a half. "The voice is gone, man," the singer says. "You want to try it again?"

"It's a waltz, man," says the producer.

"It's not a waltz," the singer says.

"May I have this dance?"

"Have you heard about the new Bob Dylan record?"

"No, what about it?"

"It's called 'Like a Rolling Stone.' Can you believe that? Like a *Rolling Stone*. Like he wants to join the band. Like *he's* a Rolling Stone."

"What does it sound like?"

"I don't know. It's not out yet. I read about it."

"You're kidding, right?"

"So who's the 'Napoleon in rags' the girl in the song used to laugh at? The music is great, the words are a bunch of nonsense."

"It's obviously Dylan himself. 'The language that he used.' It's like he's putting down someone who didn't like his songs."

"He's not that stupid. That can't be it."

"Yeah, so who is it if it's not him?"

"I don't know. Martin Luther King?"

Questioner: "What happens if they have to cut a song in half like 'Subterranean Homesick Blues'?"

Bob Dylan: "They didn't have to cut that in half."

"They didn't have to but they did."

"No, they didn't."

"Yeah?"

"You're talking about 'Like a Rolling Stone.'"

"Oh, yeah."

"They cut it in half for the disc jockeys. Well, you see, it didn't matter for the disc jockeys if they had it cut in half, because the other side was just a continuation . . . if anybody was interested they could just turn it over and listen to what really happens."

—press conference, San Francisco, 3 December 1965

A drum beat like a pistol shot.

24 July 1965 was the day Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone" went into the charts. It was on the radio all across the U.S.A. and heading straight up. When drummer Bobby Gregg brought his stick down for the opening noise of the six-minute single, the sound—a kind of announcement, then a void of silence, then a rising fanfare, then the song—fixed a moment when all those caught up in modern music found themselves engaged in a running battle for a prize no one bothered to name: the greatest record ever made, perhaps, or the greatest record that ever would be made. "Where are we going? To the top?" the Beatles would ask themselves in the early 1960s, when no one but they knew. "To the toppermost of the poppermost!" they promised themselves, even before their manager Brian Epstein began writing London record companies on his provincial Liverpool stationary, promising that his new group would someday be bigger than Elvis. But by 1965 everyone, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Bob

Dylan, and whoever else could catch a ride on the train were topping each other month by month, as if carried by a flood. Was it the flood of fear and possibility that had convulsed much of the West since the assassination of President Kennedy less than two years before, a kind of nihilist freedom, in which old certainties were swept away like trees and cars? The utopian revolt of the Civil Rights Movement, or the strange cultures appearing in college towns and cities across the nation, in England, in Germany? No one heard the music on the radio as part of a separate reality. Every new hit seemed full of novelty, as if its goal was not only to top the charts but to stop the world in its tracks and then start it up again. What was the top? Fame and fortune, glamour and style, or something else? A sound that you could leave behind, to mark your presence on the earth, something that would circulate in the ether of lost radio signals, somehow received by generations to come, or apprehended even by those who were already gone? The chance to make the times speak in your own voice, or the chance to discover the voice of the times?

Early in the year the Beatles had kicked off the race with the shimmering thrill of the opening and closing chords of "Eight Days a Week." No one could imagine a more joyous sound. In March the Rolling Stones put out the deathly, oddly quiet "Play with Fire," a single that seemed to call the whole pop equation of happiness, speed, and excitement into question: to undercut it with a refusal to be ashamed of one's

own intelligence, to suspend the contest in a cul-de-sac of doubt. Three months later they came back with "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction." It erased the doubt, and the race was on again.

Bob Dylan had not really come close with "Subterranean Homesick Blues" in April, his first rock 'n' roll record after four albums—four folk albums that had nevertheless redrawn the pop map—and his first entry into the singles charts. The Beatles would dominate the second half of the year with "Yesterday" (was a record with nothing but strings still rock 'n' roll? "Of course it is," said a friend. "John Lennon has to be playing one of the violins"), and end it with the coolly subtle *Rubber Soul*, the best album they would ever make. Barry McGuire would reach number one with "Eve of Destruction," an imitation-Dylan big-beat protest song. The Dylan imitation was the hook, what grabbed you—and the production was so formulaic, so plainly a jump on a trend, that the formula and the trend became hooks in themselves. In that season, to hear "Eve of Destruction" as a fake was also to recognize that the world behind it, a world of racism, war, greed, starvation, and lies, was real—and, as if apocalypse was itself just another hook, actually deserved to be destroyed. In the pop arena it seemed anything could happen; it seemed that month by month everything did. The race was not only between the Beatles, Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, and everyone else. The pop world was in a race with the greater world, the world of wars and elections,

work and leisure, poverty and riches, white people and black people, women and men—and in 1965 you could feel that the pop world was winning.

When people first heard about it, even before they first heard it, "Like a Rolling Stone" seemed less like a piece of music than a stroke of upsmanship beyond pop ken. "Eight of the Top Ten songs were Beatles songs," Bob Dylan would remember years later, casting back to a day in Colorado, listening to John, Paul, George, and Ringo soon after their arrival in the United States in 1964. "I knew they were pointing the direction where music had to go . . . It seemed to me a definite line was being drawn. This was something that had never happened before." That was the moment that took Bob Dylan out of his folk singer's clothes—and now here he was, outflanking the Rolling Stones with a song *about* them. That was the word.

The pop moment, in that season, really was that delirious. But when the song hit the radio, when people heard it, when they discovered that it wasn't about a band, they realized that the song did not explain itself at all, and that they didn't care. In the wash of words and instruments, people understood that the song was a rewrite of the world itself. An old world was facing a dare it wasn't ready for; as the song traced its long arc across the radio, a world that was taking shape seemed altogether in flux. As the composer Michael Pisaro wrote in 2004, "Like a Rolling Stone" might be "a song that has as its backdrop some problems the guy

narrating it is having with his girl." It might be even more, a warning to someone for whom everything has always come easily, in times that are about to get rough, "but I am unable to hear it so simply: that is, that he (or the world) has done her the favor of stripping away her illusions, and now she can live honestly." Pisaro goes on, in a few words that are like a launching pad:

His conviction, the dead certainty that he has a right to say exactly this, is still exhilarating and bone-chilling. After all these years the song has not been dulled by time and repetition.

In some ways it's also a difficult song to hear now, because it is a vision of a time that never came to pass. I may be wrong about this, since I was only four years old in 1965. But that time (or is it the time *created* by the song?) seems to have been the last moment in American history when the country might have changed, in a fundamental way, for the better. The song, even now, registers this possibility, brings it to a point, focuses your attention on it, and then forces you to decide what is to be done.

His voice tells you this (tells you everything): he's not really talking to her—he's talking to *you* (and me; all of us). The voice is infinitely nuanced—at times an almost authoritarian monotone (not unlike Ginsberg reading "Howl"), at times compassionate, tragic (the voice of Jacques-Louis David in his painting of Marat)—but also angry, vengeful, gleeful, ironic, weary, spectral, haranguing. And it would sound this way in Ancient Greek or contemporary Russian. There is so much desire and so much power in

this voice, translated into a sensitivity that enables it to detect tiny vibrations emanating from the earth. But like a Geiger counter developing a will of its own, it wavers between trying to record the coming quake and trying to *make it happen*. This is where the song stakes its claim on eternity.

And then Pisaro is in the air, looking down as the song continues to play and the landscape begins to convulse:

What is the nature of the decision Dylan is driving towards? Whether you are going to forsake your past in the name of an unknowable future, where nothing is certain, everything is up for grabs, no food, no home, just a wagon barreling down the road. It is not a sensible decision. Of course some at the time made exactly this decision, but what strikes me about Dylan's song is that he's not only asking you (and me) personally to make this decision, he wants the whole country to do it: *right now*. As if a country could shed its past like snakeskin. As if, if we could see our situation with clarity, we would realize we are already there. I have to hear this as a call for some kind of spontaneous revolution. Not necessarily a violent one; but undoubtedly a very *strange* one. What would a "Napoleon in rags" kind of country look like, act like? Lots of poor folks wandering the land, making speeches and barbeque?

Or, as reviewer Shirley Poston put it in *The Beat*, the newsletter of the Los Angeles Top 40 station KRLA, after

Dylan's performance of "Like a Rolling Stone" at the Hollywood Bowl on 3 September 1965, only the third time he had played the song in public, with the tune still finding its feet, and with some in the crowd booing the once-humble folk singer who had gone for the pop charts: "He knew the song by heart. So did his audience."

People then understood everything Pisaro is saying now. But then the sense of moment ruled. Few had any reason to imagine that in "Like a Rolling Stone" the pull of the past was as strong as the pull of the future—and the pull of the future, the future that first drum shot was announcing, the line it was drawing, was very strong. There was no reason to wonder how many dead or vanished voices the song contained, or to realize that along with the song's own named characters—"Miss Lonely," the "Mystery Tramp," the "Diplomat"—or Phil Spector and the Righteous Brothers' "You've Lost that Lovin' Feeling," from only months before, or even Ritchie Valens's "La Bamba," from 1958—present also were the likes of Son House, of Mississippi, with "My Black Mama" from 1930, Hank Williams with "Lost Highway" from 1949, or Muddy Waters in 1950, with "Rollin' Stone." So the Rolling Stones had named themselves—in the beginning, in London in 1962, they were the Rollin' Stones. Which is to say that in the alchemy of pop the first word about "Like a Rolling Stone" had been right after all. The song was about the

Rolling Stones—if you follow the way the two words travel and the picture they make, how nothing in American vernacular music holds still, how every phrase and image, every riff and chime, is always moving, state to state, decade to decade, never at home with whoever might claim it, always seeking a new body, a new song, a new voice.

CHAPTER FIVE

Once Upon a Time

The song is a sound, but before that it is a story. But it's not one story. "I have the audacity to *play* 'Like a Rolling Stone' in my show, just about every night," the country singer Rodney Crowell said in 2004. "I did it as a lark, to show off to some of the guys in my band that I knew all the words. But I was immediately struck by the audience response to the song. From six-year-olds to seventy-year-olds—*they all know the chorus to that song*. I couldn't put it away; every night, it's a unifying thing. I think it's somehow part of the fabric of our culture."

"This is about growing up, this is about discovering what's going on around you, realizing that life isn't all you've been told," Jann Wenner said that same year; thirty-seven years before, in 1967, he had named his magazine *Rolling Stone*

because, as he explained in the first issue, "Muddy Waters took the name for a song he wrote; the Rolling Stones took their name from Muddy's song, and 'Like a Rolling Stone' was the title of Bob Dylan's first rock and roll record."

He's throwing it at you in the verse: here's your problem. Here's what's happened. So now you're without a home, you're on your own, complete unknown, like a rolling stone. That's a liberating thing. This *is* a song about liberation. About being liberated from your old hang-ups, and your old knowledge, and the fear, the frightening part of facing that, particularly when he gets to scrounging for your next meal—the worst thing that happens to you. Or, "*Do you want to make a deal*"—there's a lot of *fear* in that, in the line, in the lyric, in the melody.

"Once upon a time you dressed so fine"—I don't see it as being about a rich person who falls apart, I see it as being about a *comfortable* individual, or a comfortable society, suddenly discovering what's going on. Vietnam—the society we're taught about, and you realize, as you become aware, drug aware, socially aware, the disaster of the commercial society.

The key line is, "You've got no secrets to conceal." Everything has been stripped away. You're on your own, you're free now. You've gone through all these levels of experience—you fell, someone you believed in robbed you blind, took everything he could steal, and finally, it's all been taken away. You're so helpless, and now you've got *nothing left*. And you're invisible—you've got no secrets—that's so liberating. You've nothing to fear anymore. It's

useless to hide any of that shit. *You're a free man*. That to me is the message. You know: "Songs of Innocence and Experience."

I always thought it was my story, in a certain sense. *I* used to go to the finest schools. Nobody ever taught you how to live out on the street. So, to me, coming from private schools, and my background, being a preppy, ending up at Berkeley, and all of a sudden, taking drugs, things change, you're no longer in a private school, all of a sudden you're running around with Ken Kesey, Hell's Angels, and drug dealers—and one of *them's* the Mystery Tramp. At some Acid Test, and some weirdo comes up to you, with a beard, a top hat—you stare into the vacuum of his eyes, and ask him, do you want to make a deal. That *happened* to me. *Too* many times.

In 1978, in *Jimi Hendrix: Voodoo Child of the Aquarian Age*, David Henderson made it Jimi Hendrix's story. The finest writing there is on "Like a Rolling Stone" is Henderson on the performance of the song at the Monterey Pop Festival in 1967 by the Jimi Hendrix Experience, Hendrix's first band. It was a great stomp, as much a fan's tribute as a master's appropriation: "Yes, I know I missed a verse, don't worry," Hendrix says after skipping from the second to the fourth. Huge chords ride over the beginning of each verse like rain clouds; the tune is taken very slowly, with Hendrix's thick, street-talk drawl sounding nothing at all like Dylan's Midwestern dust storm. Laughter erupts all over the song: "Hey, baby—would you like to, ah, ah, make a *deeeallllll*?" But for the six minutes Hendrix is playing, across five pages Henderson all but leaves

the song on the stage and enters Hendrix's mind as he plays. Now "Like a Rolling Stone" is about Hendrix's childhood in Seattle, where as a schoolboy he attended an Elvis Presley show at the Rainiers minor-league baseball park, when Elvis asked all present to rise for the National Anthem and then plunged into "Hound Dog"; his years as a journeyman on the Chitlin' Circuit; his tours with Joey Dee and the Starlighters of "Peppermint Twist" fame; his life in Harlem—an odyssey. Henderson turns himself into Hendrix's shade, as if in these pages of fiction he was watching from across the street, writing it down as it happened.

"Once upon a time you dressed so fine . . ." Right there in that moment Jimi saw himself as he had lived in America. Yeah, he had been the fine-dressing R&B entertainer, and then suffered what many of his friends at the time thought was a great fall. Hanging out in the Village with all those beatniks and hippies. Taking all that speed for energy and to fend off starvation. The slick veneer front of the R&B musician destroyed for him in the Village. Disdain from his friends "uptown"—"he's looking scruffy and acting crazy."

He saw himself walking MacDougal Street hearing the song, and every time always so amazed at how it hit so close to home. "Like a Rolling Stone" seemed to come forth from every window, every bar. Once he had walked clear across the Village to the East Village, and stopped in a bar called The Annex on Tenth Street and Avenue B. Out of the sodden, snow-encrusted streets, dark and severe and utterly desolate, he walked into the slit-windowed one-room Annex where a great swell of music greeted him, and the

entire bar was singing along. The jukebox was turned up to full volume. The place was dark but packed, and they were all singing ". . . Rolling Stone" jubilantly, as if it were the National Anthem.

And then Henderson takes Hendrix deeper into a new life, into his first hesitant performances in tiny clubs, as he found his way to "the odd folk and blues records so treasured by so many in the Village," as his attempts to play Bob Dylan records for his Harlem friends were met with scorn and disgust, as he stood with the other hustlers on Forty-second Street, "waiting for some stranger to give them a nod." As Hendrix plays the song, Henderson as Hendrix reverses its perspective, taking it away from Dylan's subject, the *you* who "used to laugh about/ Everybody that was hanging out," and giving the song over to the nameless people hiding in the song's alleys and doorways, people like Hendrix, scuffling downtown: "They had laughed at him." "It was a song that only Dylan could sing—until now," Henderson writes, but it's he who is singing it. It's he who has passed it on. As Henderson tells it, "Like a Rolling Stone" is not a story of liberation, it is an epic.*

* "I think Jimi's gonna be remembered for centuries, just like people like Leadbelly and Lightnin' Hopkins," the late John Phillips, one of the organizers of the Monterey Pop Festival, said in 1992, then placing Hendrix in an America so alluring and mysterious that it changed Hendrix's story once again, recasting his whole brief career as a dare, or a race against an opponent Phillips didn't name, opening up a tale yet to be told: "He's really a folk hero, another John Henry."