

The Beatles (Briefly) & Enter Bob Dylan

Many people think The Beatles played rock & roll. In reality they were four cute white boys converting Chuck Berry's songs into pop music. Bessie Smith's ragged blues "*you gotta give me some*" became the insipid and coy "*I wanna hold your hand.*"

It may as well be stated baldly: I am not a Beatles fan. I've only ever bought one Beatles album and that lapse was because I sort of liked *Eleanor Rigby* for a short time. Now I find it hard to listen to more than a song or two; I viscerally cringe when someone starts quoting *Imagine* and the sight of Yoko is enough to make me hurl. Two of my younger brothers think John Lennon is a martyred saint; right up there with M.L. King and Gandhi. Needless to say this is a subject we avoid in conversation.

Like Elvis, the Beatles are mostly a cultural phenomenon but no one in my generation wants to hear it so we'll gloss that rant. In the 70s the parlor game choice was Beatles or Stones and I had to go with the Stones due to one telling bit of information: The Beatles' heroes were Elvis and Buddy Holly. The Stones heroes were Muddy Waters, Big Joe Turner and Robert Johnson. In fact the 4Bs of pop music (the Beatles, the Byrds and the Beach Boys) were almost enough to kill rock & roll. And when Crosby, Stills & Nash applied the *pièce de résistance* with *Teach Your Children* the show was over. Nuff said. Rant complete. Go to another house if you want to worship at the shrine of the Beatles.

The Civil Rights Movement (and later The Anti-War Movement) and rock 'n roll fused with folk music to become a forum for political protest. The new wave was led by a Chaplin-esque little guy from my neck of the woods and my generation, (he's April, 1941 I'm August). My main (white) man, Bob Dylan.

Dylan came out of the same rhythm & blues, country, rock & roll, folk tradition and the singer-songwriter became the new norm. The first time I saw The Man he was still billed as Robert Zimmerman; playing guitar and harmonica on top of a pool table in Dinkytown, Minnesota. His repertoire included a lot of Hank Williams and Woody Guthrie like tunes. Not a big deal in those days in that part of the country.

Minneapolis-St. Paul has always had a pretty active music scene. At that time country

was still country, not polyester, and the blues were big around the U of M. We had Dave “Snaker” Ray, “Little Sun” Glover and “Spider” John Koerner playing the bars. A guy named David Baker in my Freshmen class at the Minneapolis School Of Art (now MCAD) knew Dave Ray and brought him, Glover, Koerner in for a concert. And on just about any night you could catch one or more of them at The Triangle; a bar on the West Bank after a spaghetti with red sauce and garlic bread dinner at Mama Rosa’s. A few years later Bonnie Raitt cut her first album with a bunch of locals but I had already moved on.

One of my classmates, Gerry Martin, had a huge collection of blues records. Leadbelly was a new hero as were, Muddy Waters, Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee, Mississippi Fred McDowell, Charlie Patton John Lee Hooker, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Lightning Hopkins, Reverend Gary Davis. Gerry had them all and was also teaching himself 12 string guitar by playing along with them. I heard, or heard of all these giants for the first time at Gerry’s apartment.

There was also Herb & Bob Hicks. Herb was in our Freshman class at art school though he was maybe eight or ten years older. His younger brother Bob lived with him and later started night school as well. Herb had been in the service and was a very talented jazz pianist. Bob drove a green Austin-Healy and played base. I didn’t know it at the time but the brothers were also smoking pot on the QT. (No one was doing it openly until a couple years later.) The pot would later explain a certain twinkle Herb had in his eyes and the inappropriate cackle he would sometimes come up with. Herb and Bob *were* hip and came from around Williston, North Dakota; where they picked up hip is unknown. Herb was the first one I remember using the term “he knows”.

Herb was on the GI Bill and he and Bob played an occasional gig in a few clubs around town to pick up some cash. Most of our posse would dutifully attend and he also once gave a seminar at the school on piano where he explained some of the technicalities and styles in the history of jazz. He could mimic Earl Hines, Billy Taylor and even explain the difference between Bud Powell and Monk. I envied him and wondered why he was messing around painting when he could play jazz. Given my druthers and even a drab of talent, I would have gone the other route.

There was another friend of Herb's named Chris Ackerberg who hung around the art school for a while as well. Chris was a trumpet player and a loose canon infamous for a couple of randy escapades: My friend, The Donut Man, was once having a late dinner after a movie with a first date at a neighborhood drive-in. As he was trying to put the moves on the girl, a car screeched to a halt in the drive-way. A man, buck-naked save for a monkey mask and combat boots, jumped from the drivers seat and made a tour around the drive-in before jumping back in his car a squealing off. The Donut Man claims it was Chris Ackerberg. A detail we could all believe because Chris was known to frequently knock on ones door with his privates hanging loose. When whoever would open the door, Chris would shout, "Here it is!". I often wonder what happened to that dude. Last I heard, Herb and Bob moved even farther north after school and would up in Winnipeg, Canada, eh? Go figure.

Anyway, back to Bob. Zimmerman was "just another hillbilly" as a friend said. Nothing new there, he thought. I guess Bob was about equally impressed with Minneapolis crowds as he split for New York, as the legend goes to look up his hero Woody. And the rest is history. It took a New York audience to recognize the fact that he was unique. Six months later he was on the cover of TIME Magazine and everyone back in the Twin Cities was saying, "Yeah, remember him? He was fucking great man."

My pal Stu was still not impressed and one night passed me Dylan's first two albums. "Here," he said. "You might like these."

Thank you Stu. I did and indeed still do. I'd let Dylan speak for me on just about any issue and could compile a philosophy based on lines from his songs. I've seen him many times since; with The Band in Canada, with The Rolling Thunder Review two nights running in Springfield, MA and then New Haven, CT.

In 1980 or 81 I saw him headlining a huge bill including Joan Armatrading, Graham Parker and a few others with a crowd of 300,000 at a closed down airport about 80 clicks south of London. I had gone to London to either marry or break up with a disastrous girlfriend. The matter had yet to be decided when Christopher Ricks, an Oxford Professor of poetry and Dylan fanatic called saying he had two extra tickets. Did we want to go?

Well, doh!

We would go separately and meet at a designated flag. And so we did. Trains were leaving from London every 20 minutes or so with shuttle busses taking us to the airstrip a few miles out of town. This worked great. Going out. They had pre-sold 150,000 tickets but over 300,000 arrived and when the system broke down, the fences were pushed over and everyone found a place to spread out, squat and picnic. We found Christopher's flag at the second bank of speaker which made the stage visually about the size of a 35mm slide. The sound however was as good as a high level living room stereo.

Dylan didn't come on until evening but the weather was perfect, the pot was passed freely, blanket to blanket, English girls are nice to look at, the beer held out, the food was good and so were the warm-up musicians.

Christopher Ricks has every album and bootleg and had memorized every version of every song Dylan had recorded up to then and whenever he substituted a verse or changed a lyric, Christopher was right on it. It was refreshing to hear an academic enthuse about Dylan as poet.

By 10 pm Dylan was into encores as we all began to fade and much of the crowd had been filing out before us. When we reached what had been the gate the shuttle bus system had broken down completely. All the thousands who had arrived in increments all day were now trying to leave at the same time and that was never going to work. No one seemed to care. We all started walking 10 abreast down the dark blacktop road back to the train station. A full moon and the glow of cigarettes and joints lit the way. You could still hear the exit band playing in the distance.

Then a couple miles from town the river of flesh started backing up. The trains could not take passengers fast enough. Like many others, Christopher had driven out to the concert and we were going to spend the night at his farm house. The problem was, he'd parked on the other side of the train station.

People started drifting into the woods on either side of the road; some to roll out sleeping bags and others, including our party, wending our way through the dark woods to get around the crowd. This particular ex always claimed there were two kinds of people; sheep and goats. We

decided to be goat-ish. It worked, we made it through the woods and found Christopher's car.

The next morning, after a delicious hit-the-pillow sleep under down comforters in a chilly old farm house, an equally delicious English breakfast complete with stewed tomatoes and rashers of thick bacon, Christopher drove us into London and dropped us at the Underground. As we rode the train back to Hampstead, stragglers were still filing back dragging sleeping bags, looking bleary but sated. I could tell that my ex, who had always been unrequited in love with Christopher, was in that state of mind. It got very silent around the Heath for the next couple days.

Those circumstances were probably a karmic prelude to my attempting to leave London. I had spontaneously flown over on an extremely cheap Virgin Airlines flight. Now, as it turned out, Virgin was crashing and burning fast on the very day I was scheduled to leave. Flights, if not already cancelled, were very shaky, cues were forming everywhere with people trying to get on earlier flights, cues were being jumped by those goatish enough to be obnoxious. Sleeping bags were unrolled and many were giving up and going to sleep on the floor. I had my number and it was low enough to make the cut. I held my place on line, staring down a few in the process. I used to have what I called "Dries Shit Luck" and my luck held. I got out of London on Virgin's last flight. I read the account of it all the next morning in the NY Times. Chaos had taken hold soon after I was gone. I took that as an omen and called it quits with said girlfriend. I've never seen Christopher since but I read about him occasionally and he's still listening to Dylan too. *Things Have Changed* haven't they Christopher?

The last time I saw Dylan he was sharing the bill with Paul Simon at Madison Square Garden. Best seats I've had since Dinkytown. One of my wife Ann's associates gifted about twenty people to pre-concert cocktails in Chelsea, then a chartered bus to MSG and row 19 center. Still don't know what we did to deserve that but I'm not playing orthodontist to that particular horse. Both Dylan and Simon played good sets separately but when they tried a couple duets it got pretty dismal. Both excellent lyricists, they didn't seem to have found a common ground. Dylan has always been a cut askance of Tin Pan Alley and that is Simon's stomping ground. Maybe those two Jewish boys should have checked out Lieber and Stoller. Simon was

also plugging his nearly fatal Capeman materiel and barely escaped with his life.

While we're on Paul Simon, it should probably be noted that I've always hated Simon & Garfunkle. I put them alongside CSN, the 3 Bs and can't really listen. Some of their songs are so familiar that you find yourself singing along until you realize it's just crap. And then you feel so used and cheap!!

Once Simon dumped Art, however, and came out with *Rhymin' Simon* I began to like him a lot. And *Graceland* is one of the great pop albums. Thus it was that when they did their reunion concert in Central Park, I decided to take a chance. It was free, for one thing, the weather was great, and I had some killer Jamaican pot. I was single and on the prowl. How bad could it be?

I rode up to the great lawn and entered the park on the East side, locked my bike to a lamp post just inside the park and strolled into a crowd that had already grown huge. I don't really remember whether the concert was good but it must not have been too bad because I was still there when the encores began. I decided to beat the crowd out but didn't decide soon enough. You could only move with the flow, it had gotten dark and with all the masses of people the park looked completely different. I had no idea where I'd locked my bike. Shit!!!!

The crowd spit me out on 5th avenue somewhere north of where I'd entered the park and when I tried to move into the park again it was impossible. I didn't feel like sitting there until the crowd had all passed, so I hopped on the subway and went home. Next day I hopped the Lexington line back uptown, entered the park and there my bike was, right where I'd left it. The music critics said it was a great concert and calls were out for a full blown reunion. Luckily Simon didn't heed their advice and Garfunkle began his epic walk across the U.S. of A.

Back to Bob again. I have almost all of Dylans' albums and a few bootlegs and if anyone wants to give me any of the ones I don't have, I will accept them with thanks and listen to them happily. I recently found another bootleg called *Almost Went to See Elvis* and it's quite good. It seems to be rehearsal outtakes from the Traveling Wilburys sessions. Hardly a week has gone by in 44 years that I haven't listened to Dylan and of course I have favorites. Here they are in no particular order:

Blonde On Blonde, Blood On The Tracks, Positively 4th Street, Bringing It All Back Home,

Freewheeling Bob Dylan, Desire, World Gone Wrong, Highway 61 Revisited, Real Live, Good As I Been To You, MTV UnPlugged, Nashville Skyline, John Wesley Harding, Live At Budokan. I could go on, but I suppose you get the point.

Dylan has now survived an early health debacle and turned into a real troubadour. Much like Neil Young, he just keeps touring and piling on changes. I doubt if either will ever burn out because both have found ways to keep refreshing themselves. And both managed to never get totally bogged down in the sex or drugs component of rock & roll.