

Chapter 10

The Uneven Heart

BOB DYLAN THE MUSICIAN

IT IS EASY to be seduced by Dylan's lyrics: *they* were essential when he was nominated for 'Voice of a Generation', and *they* stuck in the fans' throats when he converted to Christianity. Equally easy is it to question his musical abilities: 'He can't sing', 'he can't play the harmonica', 'he only knows three guitar chords', 'his lyrics are good, but I can't stand the voice'. Et cetera ... et cetera ...

But what if it's first and foremost the music that has captured one's attention? Or put differently: if one is of the opinion that *what* is said cannot meaningfully be separated from *how* it is said? (this is a more unproblematic premise in painting, where how something is painted is usually considered more important than what the painting is *of*). In this article, I argue that what is most appealing about Dylan's art and what creates the impression that what he does and says is significant, is the sense of a direct address as an expression of a life and a pulse, and that this aspect of his work first and foremost comes to expression through musical means, and not through the lyrics, because the meaning of a song is not primarily textual but musical, in a fundamental sense: it is based on the conflation of a sound and a set of meaningful associations.

This theme may be introduced through two examples. My very first encounter with Dylan's music was not through Dylan himself, but through Peter, Paul and Mary, in a clip which I have later identified as a performance from the Newport festival, taken from the documentary *Festival* (1967). They were singing 'The Times They Are A-Changin'', and it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen or heard. Mary Travers' blonde hair, waving in the wind in the evening darkness of the festival around her powerful face, and the perfect three-part harmony in the refrain, where one voice remained on the same tone as a pedal point around which the other two would circle,

caressingly like a cat around a leg—it impressed me deeply. When I several years later heard Dylan’s own version, it was a completely different song. The voice was one thing—I was prepared for *that*—but it was everything else: all harmonical complexity was gone; the guitar may have played some of the tones that used to accompany Mary Travers’ hair, but the sensual beauty was not there. The same goes for the rhythm: where the trio had been soaring through the song and the night, with the message: ‘We can fly wherever we want to, ’cause the times are a-changin’’, Dylan’s voice and guitar hammered in, in the most unsophisticated way, the ominous perspective—like a desperate but controlled, calculating man who was likely to stab whoever was blocking up the hall. It was raw and insistent, unpleasant and yet inescapable. All the beauty was gone, but when the loss of the pleasant dream had resided, the experienced remained of something much more real.

This is not to say that Dylan can’t fly. But when he does, it is the result of his shimmering, nervous energy, like in the scene from *Eat the Document* (1966) where he’s at the piano playing ‘Ballad of a Thin Man’—although sitting? no, he is dancing, soaring, jumping, rocking, and his piano is dancing along with him. He can’t sit still; he stands up, the fingers on the keys are trembling and his whole body is glowing with a force which one could not have imagined could have lived in the quiet song.

His entire career can be described in similar terms: there is a restlessness, a quest for ever new challenges, new genres, new formats, new forms of expression, which is deeply engaging and which makes it an interesting project to follow the process, investigate new aspects and angles, listen to screechy old concert recording and figuring out what to say about them. It is interesting mainly because it all has to do with ways of coupling *meaning* with *sound*, whether it is the sounds of language or music. Thus, it is not simply a metaphorical description to say that Dylan’s and Peter, Paul and Mary’s versions of ‘The Times’ are completely different songs: they are different songs. And Dylan’s well over a thousand versions of ‘All Along the Watchtower’ are in a certain sense a thousand different songs, each with different layers of signification.

It would be an exaggeration to say that all these thousand ‘songs’ are equally exciting—some are clearly of the *day-at-the-office*-kind—but seen in the full perspective, even the unsuccessful days contribute to the image of a heart beating. Studying Dylan’s music over the years is thus the study of a life—that life which comes to expression in the performances, but first and foremost the musical ‘life’ whose pulse it is one is hearing. This life is not necessarily accessible through a tradition study of genre, influences, and biography, because its life-character resides in a chain of interpretations which—possibly—starts with Dylan himself, but which in any case has one

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