



A Napoleon in Rags and the Language that He Used

Go ahead and laugh, but I am here to suggest late on this Memorial Day afternoon in 2002, following the week of Bob Dylan's sixtieth birthday, that "Like a Rolling Stone" is not only our greatest American song but a kind of national anthem in disguise.

I have loved this song from the moment I heard it back in 1965, being driven to my dishwashing and floor-swabbing restaurant job on the Lake Erie Road in northeastern Ohio. The original '45, clocking in at six minutes and eight seconds, was revolutionary radio. Bob Dylan was already famous, but for political songs like "Blowin' in the Wind" and "A Hard Rain's a Gonna Fall."

This was something else. It wasn't like any love song you ever heard, yet it was sung to someone or something Dylan knew intimately – the ultimate confidante, someone both accepted and despised. He sang it to himself. It is a song of ferocious self-absorption and self-criticism. In this sense it was the anthem for my generation, a cohort determined to do right, and to feel right doing it.

The song begins in a riverboat rhythm, with a fluttering banjo-like sound in it that puts me in mind of the pinwheel sound of a baseball card in a bicycle's spokes. My mental picture is of a large and very serious boat churning its way upstream. This boat is a ship of state, or of culture, loaded with gamblers, villains and knaves; and we have all booked passage on it.

Then Dylan begins to sing, and it is one stinging, flesh-ripping accusation after another. Whoever he's singing to seems momentarily female, or at the least vulnerable: *Beware doll, you're bound to fall. You've gone to the finest school all right, Miss Lonely, but you know you only used to get juiced in it.*

No song has ever been driven by such hatred. One can imagine someone being that angry – but sustaining that white-hot hate in words for six minutes is a challenge, not to mention simultaneously tempering it with a kind of sorrowful sympathy:

*Now you don't talk so loud, now you don't seem so proud,
about having to be scrounging for your next meal – how'd do
that?*

It is the mystery that is our Bob. Dylan was more than just a songwriter or poet, he was our mystifying prophetic personality, embodying so much of the tension, ambivalence, ego and disdain that is natural to us, and particularly to my ego-strong generation.

That mighty boat slogging its way upstream was all of us, the America of our time, with its contradictory dreams and appetites. "Like a Rolling Stone" is the song that "Blowin' in the Wind," which advertised for a change of national mind and heart, was too weak, too half-begun, too rhetorical to be. This new song was like a screaming spotlight that baked its subject in the heat of its own hate.

The hypocrisy is one that everyone I ever went to school with has carried around all his or her life: How can we be virtuous and decent as the people we see ourselves as in our best ideals, when our institutions and our culture and our own personal greed, cowardice and selfishness obliterate those good intentions time and time again?

Miss Lonely isn't Joan Baez. Miss Lonely is self-righteous Lady Liberty in New York Harbor, pleased with the poem on her pedestal, but standing watch over the ripoff of every immigrant that stares up at her, the exploitation of the unwhite, the routine slaughter conducted in the name of democracy and freedom. Our manifest destiny isn't just to crisscross a continent, it is to be disgraced by our own jingoism, naked to the world.

Here follows the text of the song, and a few foolish notes of my own. What I like about my idea is that it rescues a song I love from being simply vindictive. He takes it a step farther, to transformation. Dylan is accusing not just one crummy individual who disappointed him personally, but a broad swath or culture or psychodynamic that has blinded itself to its own lies, Dylan is more than just the self-indulgent brat of "Positively 4th Street" (*You know I'd rather see you paralyzed*), but a kind of latter-day Jeremiah taking an entire smug, bourgeois, self-justifying planet to task.

In his Christian phase, Dylan advised the world that, devil or God, "you gotta serve somebody," that there is no hiding from the moral choices we make as people. Here he is saying the

same thing, only he is stabbing us to death with it. It is an anti-national anthem, calling us to atone as a people for our egotism, our cant, and our pride. As such it ranks not just as a classic piece of beat poetry, but as a stirring social critique.

What an odd person he must have been, so ferociously proud himself, yet called, at a baby's age of 25 years, to admonish a grasping, material world for its self-congratulation and vanity. The question remains, can we approximate the humility we require to be just to one another, and honest to ourselves? Or do we just twist in the breeze he is blowin', stirred only by his withering contempt?

I'd like to know.

THE WORDS

Once upon a time you dressed so fine
You 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 hangin' out
Now you don't talk so loud
Now you don't seem so proud
About having to be scrounging for your next meal.
How does it feel
How does it feel
To be without a home
Like a complete unknown
Like a rolling stone?

You've gone to the finest school all right, Miss Lonely
But you know you only used to get juiced in it
And nobody has ever taught you how to live on the street
And now you find out you're gonna have to get used to it
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 ask him do you want to make a deal?

How does it feel
How does it feel
To be on your own
With no direction home
Like a complete unknown
Like a rolling stone?

You never turned around to see the frowns on the jugglers and the clowns
When they all come down and did tricks for you
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 the 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 be on your own
With no direction home
Like a complete unknown
Like a rolling stone?

Princess on the steeple and all the pretty people
They're drinkin', thinkin' that they got it made
Exchanging all kinds of precious gifts and things
But you'd better lift your diamond ring, you'd better pawn it babe
You used to be so amused
A Napoleon in rags and the language that he used
Go to him now, he calls you, you can't refuse
When you got nothing, you got nothing to lose
You're invisible now, you got no secrets to conceal.
How does it feel
How does it feel
To be on your own
With no direction home
Like a complete unknown
Like a rolling stone?