

ON BOB DYLAN

In 1993, when I was just shy of seven (yes, I'm dating myself), I had the glorious opportunity to see Santana and Bob Dylan perform at what was formerly known as the Concord Pavilion in the San Francisco Bay Area but which, as with many venues, has since been renamed after a corporation, in this case Sleep Train. My six year-old self was acutely aware of the seductive nature of Santana's guitar solos, but concluded that Dylan's voice was "not very beautiful." When clarified by my mother that most people come to hear what Dylan *said* rather than *how* exactly he sounded, I remarked that I couldn't make out the words either (due in large part to the combination of his well-known rasp and affection for alcohol).

Admittedly, when seeing Dylan in 2013 with my then-boyfriend at Jones Beach Theater in the thriving metropolis of Wantagh, New York – along with Wilco, Ryan Bingham, and Beck – little had changed. It took until the muffled words "...but I was born to late" to realize that we had in fact been listening all that time to an old favorite, "Simple Twist of Fate," the second track on one of the greatest break-up albums of all time, *Blood on the Tracks*. And yet there was something comforting and familiar about knowing that we were in the presence of Bob Dylan, to whose tribute marked our third date at Webster Hall on Manhattan's lower east side ("Dylan fest"), and whose music, along with that of the Beatles and of course Bruce, comprised the soundtrack of my life.

The number of people who share with me amusement in "Just Like a Woman" is few, my mother among them, thanks to the *Annie Hall* exchange between Woody Allen and Shelley Duval ("...*yes she does*"), and it is not considered sacrilegious to acknowledge that many people perform Dylan better than does Dylan himself (for example, Springsteen's compelling "Chimes of Freedom" and Hendrix's explosive "All Along the Watchtower" perhaps better known than the original version). And yet despite the occasional alternation between gravel and twang, I find myself most at home with the oh-so-familiar "Mr. Tambourine Man" or "Visions of Johanna" or his duet of "Girl from the North Country Side" with the great Johnny Cash, later covered beautifully by Rosanne Cash on *The List*.

On the television show "Inside the Actors Studio," James Lipton always concludes his interview by asking his guest a series of questions, among them their favorite sound. Many say their children's laughter, which of course draws cooing from the audience. For me, it would be a four-way tie: the opening harmonica chord of "Thunder Road," the opening guitar chord of "A Hard Day's Night," the final piano chord of "A Day in the Life," and the opening drumbeat of "Graceland." And yet it is in the words of "It's Alright Ma, I'm Only Bleeding" that I find myself most often escaping into Dylan's genius, his madness, his anger, his pain equaled only, in my view, by Lennon's "Working Class Hero." As an angsty teenager, the words "bent out of shape from society's pliers" hit home, and to this day I find myself writing parts of my dissertation in the (in)famous White Horse Tavern, which facilitated the drinking habits that produced the greatness of Dylan Thomas and Robert Zimmerman, a.k.a. Bob Dylan, in hopes of absorbing at least some of their genius and innovation that shaped decades of music and poetry that followed. In the Guinness stains at the bar are, no doubt, remnants of the poetry and prose to which I have been addicted for the better share of my life.

For those of us who grew up on Dylan, whether in real time or decades later, we have loved and lost with him. We have experienced first love with “I Want You” and “Love Minus Zero (No Limit),” we have spent parts of our youth and college days disappearing through the smoke rings of our minds (down the foggy ruins of time...), been maddened by foreign policy and injustice with “Masters of War” and “Hurricane” (“doesn’t it make you feel ashamed to live in a land where justice is a game?”), suffered devastating losses with “Sarah” and “If You See Her, Say Hello,” and reflected on missteps with “I Threw It All Away.” It is truly timeless, and walking through New York’s West Village, one can still sense his presence and the inspiration for lyrics perhaps unparalleled in impact.