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Bob Dylan: The Mechanics of His Social and Political Influence during the 1960s

Certain social dynamics in the United States during the 1960s such as the growing Civil Rights Movement as well as increasing anti-war sentiment stirred by Lyndon B. Johnson's political movements in the Vietnam War led to a cultural phenomenon that became evident in the era's music. The folk revival scene led by Bob Dylan exhibited evidence of the reaction to such social issues by the average American. In I'm Not There, aspects of Bob Dylan's life are portrayed through multiple actors and actresses telling stories that relate to true events to show the audience how Bob Dylan "participated" in the 1960s. The film essentially captures the essence of the musician and poet's core during the peak of America's social unrest.

In terms of the Civil Rights Movement, it is clear that Bob Dylan's music had provided inspiration and potential motivation for the Black Panther Party (BPP), a radical political group during the 1960s. According to Chris Trueman, Newton is revered as one of the BPP's founders alongside Bobby Seale (Trueman). At a photo exhibit during October of 2008, "one photo shows Huey P. Newton listening to Bob Dylan's Highway 61 revisited in Berkeley, 1970" (Thompson, 2008). With this photographic support, one can conclude that the Black Panther Party was founded by a man who showed a great deal of support for Dylan and his revolutionary music.

In I'm Not There, Huey is seen sitting on a table wearing headphones listening to the song "Ballad of a Thin Man" from Dylan's 1965 album *Highway 61 Revisited*. In the middle of listening to the song, Huey paused it and said "Bobby, you ain't hearin' me, man. No, we are the geeks. You dig?"

(Haynes, 2007). This is an obvious reference to Bobby Seale, the co-founder of the BPP. "The geeks" is a term pulled from the song "Ballad of a Thin Man" and it is seen in context as

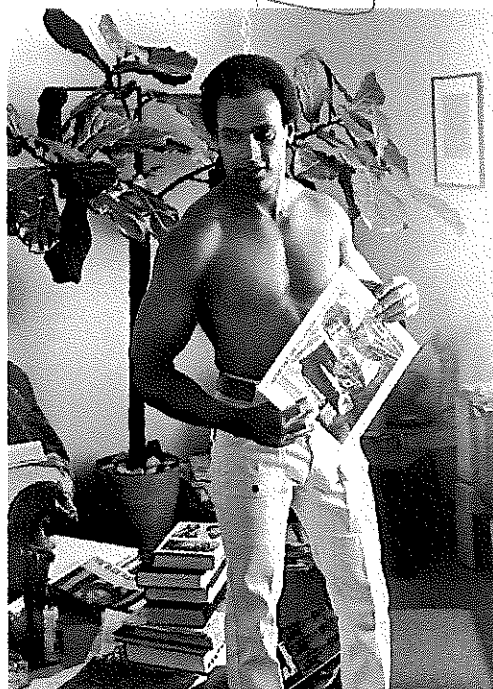
"You hand in your ticket And you go watch *the geek* Who immediately walks up to you When he hears you speak And says, how does it feel To be such a freak? And you say, impossible As he hands you a bone Because something is happening here But you don't know what it is Do you, Mister Jones?" (Ballad of a Thin Man, 1965).

Clearly the movie is inferring that Huey is forming an association between the music and the social situation of African American's in the U.S. thereby adding to the notion that Dylan affected the movement.

In a manuscript of tape recordings by Bobby Seale between 1968 and 1970, there are multiple incidents of Seale referring to Huey's attraction to Dylan as well as Dylan's meta-involvement in the BPP production. An excerpt goes as follows,

"While we were laying that paper out, in the background we could hear a record, and the song was named "Ballad of a Thin Man" by Bob

Dylan. Now the melody was in my mind. I actually heard it; I could hear the melody to this record. I could hear the sound and the beat to it. But I really didn't hear the words. This record played after we stayed up laying out the paper. And it played the *next* night after we stayed up laying out the paper. I think it was around the third afternoon that the record was playing. We played that record over and over and over. Lots of brothers stayed right over there with a lot of shotguns for security. It was a righteous security in those days. There wasn't any bullshit," (Seale, 1968-1970).



As the excerpt explains, Dylan was played aloud on records while BPP members congregated and worked on publishing articles and newspapers; all of which for the purpose of achieving the goal of civil

and racial equality. "We played that record over and over," is evidence of the impact the music had made on the radical organization.

The political disturbances induced by the growing Civil Rights Movement provided for much opportunity by folk musicians to send their messages on the situations. These songs of protest flooded the streets of Greenwich Village and Haight-Ashbury. However, in I'm Not There, Alice Fabian is a character representing 60s folk artist Joan Baez and she stated that "[Bob] really stopped protesting after 1963. He said you couldn't affect change with a song. You could only write about what was inside you," (Haynes, 2007). Bob Dylan had publically stated numerous times that the songs he wrote were never meant to be protest songs. According to Kim Ruehl, Bob Dylan found "himself pigeon-holed as a protest song writer," (Ruehl).

Dylan's second studio album *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* contained songs that essentially solidified him as the leader in folk protest scene. Despite this, Nicole Lemieux claims that, "the more he was drawn into the movement, the more he resisted it. Dylan began to resent the status he had been unwittingly given as a songwriter and the profound importance that was being placed on his songs," (Lemieux, 2006). As in I'm Not There, the character Jude Quinn stated that "saying the "cause of peace" is like saying a hunk of butter- I don't know how you can listen to anybody that is dedicated to the hunk and not the butter... there's no one out there who's ever going to be converted by a song," (Haynes, 2007). The "hunk of butter" analogy in essence, shows how Dylan is against those who put too much weight on the cause and in doing so, forget about the peace. The dedication to the "hunk" opposed to the "butter" explains that.

While Dylan had ensured that he was not a protest artist, his music still became iconic with the "protest movement." This is largely due to the fact that at the March on Washington in 1963 where Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I have a dream Speech," Bob Dylan performed to the mass audience

“Blowin’ in the Wind.” As a result, he was then associated with the Civil Rights Movement and protest altogether.

The release of *The Times They Are a-Changin’* in 1964 showed parallels to songs in his previous album. Songs such as “The Times They Are a-Changin’” and “Only a Pawn in their Game” contributed to the growing persona of Dylan as a protest singer. However, Dylan responded to this growing sense of entitlement by releasing *Another Side of Bob Dylan*; an album which provided insight into his own sentimentality and inner self opposed to his surroundings. In other words, the album resembled that of reflective songs opposed to politically driven songs (Lemieux, 2006).

It’s clear that the lyrics from *Another Side of Bob Dylan* are more personally connected and less like the “protest” or “storytelling” songs previously recorded. In the *Times They Are a-Changin’*, “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” tells the story of a white man who gets away with murdering a black woman and is only sentenced to a few months of jail. This is essentially one of Dylan’s earlier “finger-pointing songs;” it contrasts with the song “My Back Pages” from *Another Side of Bob Dylan*. In “My Back Pages,” Dylan “repudiated his protest phase” and focuses on his individuality opposed to the persona created by his audience and the media (Schuster, 2001). The final verse goes as follows: “Yes, my guard stood hard when abstract threats / Too noble to neglect / Deceived me into thinking I had something to protect Good and bad, I define these terms Quite clear, no doubt, somehow. Ah, but I was so much older then, I’m younger than that now,” (My Back Pages, 1964). “When abstract threats too noble to neglect deceived me into thinking I had something to protect,” is evidence of how Dylan never intentionally wrote protest songs and rather, they were his interpretations of what was going on around him.

Alongside the Civil Rights Movement, the United States was experiencing backlash from President Lyndon B. Johnson’s “Americanization” of Vietnam. The U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War stimulated the protest phenomenon. Dylan as the leader of the folk revival scene released many songs

that had become anthems for the anti-war movement. "Masters of War" from *The Times They Are a-Changin'* is arguably the most notable on the list of anti-war movement songs due to its undertones and ultimate message. There is apparent animosity as Dylan "calls out" politicians and leaders on the political world stage that take part in policies of violence and warfare. "Like Judas of old You lie and deceive" is a line from the song. As the quote shows, Dylan harshly confronts those who the song is directed towards by identifying them as liars and schemers.

There are also apparent graphic references in "Masters of War" and it is the first of Dylan's songs to have such gruesome lyrics. Lines such as "You hide in your mansion/ As young people's blood/ Flows out of their bodies/ And is buried in the mud" and "And I'll watch while you're lowered/ Down to your deathbed/ And I'll stand o'er your grave/ 'Til I'm sure that you're dead" establish the cold and depressing tone that Dylan poetically uses to relay his message. The diction Dylan uses throughout the song such as "grave" and "mud" sets the dark theme of the song which adds to the powerfulness of the song's meaning.

The Vietnam War stirred American fears of a nuclear holocaust due to the United State's established policy concerning the situation. Bob Dylan wrote about just that in his song "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall" from the album *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*. Dylan's surrealistic, yet poetic, lyrics explain the society that would exist if a nuclear war were to break out. For instance, "I saw guns and sharp swords in the hands of young children" and "I saw a highway of diamonds with nobody on it" lead the audience to believe that in the event of such a phenomenon, fights will break out and social unrest will occur. Moreover, people will sway their attention from luxuries, in this case diamonds, and focus their attention on how to survive instead. The chaos that would exist after the apocalyptic event is clearly evident through different ways the "blue-eyed son" chronicles experiencing his surroundings. In the song, when asked "what did you hear?" the child replied:

"I heard the sound of a thunder, it roared out a warnin'
I heard the roar of a wave that could drown the whole world

I heard one hundred drummers whose hands were a-blazin'
 I heard ten thousand whisperin' and nobody listenin'
 I heard one person starve, I heard many people laughin'
 Heard the song of a poet who died in the gutter
 Heard the sound of a clown who cried in the alley
 And it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard
 And it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall," (A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall, 1963).

The aftermath of nuclear rain on the society ("roar of a wave that could drown the whole world") would ultimately leave thousands in peril and it would overwhelm the government in their attempts to aid its citizens ("heard ten thousand whisperin' and nobody listenin'"). There would also be professional unrest for following such an apocalyptic event, many will have to adhere to new roles for prior positions will not have much necessity for survival ("Heard the song of a poet who died in the gutter/ Heard the sound of a clown who cried in the alley"). There are apparent references to how any society would react in such a catastrophic event. This song is even, in fact, relevant to any time period that faces the threat of a nuclear war because that is what the song is intentionally prescribing against.

There is an apparent relationship between the social unrest and political injustices of the early 1960s and the music of Bob Dylan. The poems he and others of the time sang were peace and while he claimed to be "act of personal conscious," they still nevertheless stirred the minds of thousands during this American period of social chaos. *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* and *The Times They Are a-Changin'* provided a great deal of insight; it showed others what was going in a way that they had never seen before and while they were just songs in the end, these songs changed people. In turn, the world changed. Bob Dylan, whether he likes it or not, changed every single person who has ever listened to one of his songs. Those who had made differences through either the Black Panther Party or the anti-war movement were under the influence of Dylan's poems. The lyrics intoxicated their minds and caused listeners to question things around them. Dylan's songs during the 1960s either lit the flame or threw wood into the furnace of social unrest.

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