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

The 1960s in the United States are characterized by a social revolution which essentially was based upon a “do it yourself” ritual known as folk music. Those who experienced folk music during this time knew it to be honest and pure because its lyrics were about what was going on around them. The war in Vietnam, the tyranny of unjust politicians and civil rights were amongst the hundreds of issues discussed through this subculture of song and art.

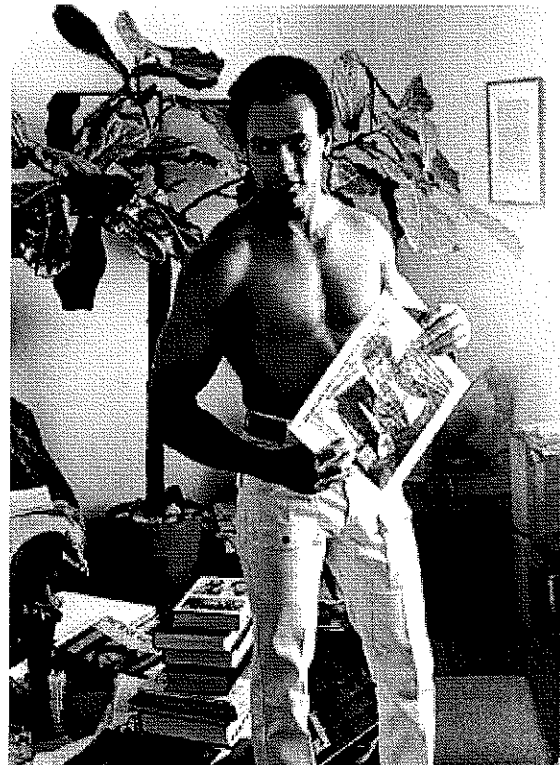
In I’m Not There, aspects of Bob Dylan’s life are portrayed through multiple actors and actresses telling stories that relate to true events to show the audience how Bob Dylan “participated” in the 1960s. The film essentially captures the essence of the musician and poet’s distinguishable and utterly complicated entity during the peak of America’s social unrest. 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. Renowned 60s folk artist Arlo Guthrie had this to say about Bob Dylan and his revolutionary music:

Everyone in my world was singing Bob Dylan songs... He was writing about freedom, war, disasters, justice, betrayal, liberty,

slavery, outlaws, freight trains, and women; all the usual stuff. And at some point he stopped being a folk singer and a songwriter and he became a warrior poet. For the first time in my life I saw a pen that put swords to shame (Early Dylan)

There is evidence based on documented interviews by fellow musicians and activists as well as lyrical notation to prove that Dylan had impacted the generation.

In terms of the Civil Rights Movement, it is clear that Bob Dylan's music provided inspiration for the Black Panther Party (BPP), a radical civil rights political group during the 1960s. According to Chris Trueman, a U.S. Political Historian, Huey P. Newton is revered as one of the BPP's founders alongside Bobby Seale. At a photo exhibit at the University Museum of Texas Southern University during October of 2008, "one photo shows Huey P. Newton listening to Bob Dylan's *Highway 61 Revisited* in Berkeley, 1970"



"At Home, Huey P. Newton listens to Bob Dylan's *Highway 61 Revisited*. Berkeley, 1970" by Stephen Shames.

(Thompson). Newton is seen standing in what appears to be an office of sorts holding the epic

album. 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.

The picture, shown below, exemplifies the link between the BPP and Bob Dylan in the context of the Civil Rights Movement.

In I'm Not There, Newton 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, Newton pauses it and says "Bobby, you ain't hearin' me, man. No, we are the geeks. You dig?" (Haynes). 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?" (Dylan, Ballad of a Thin Man)

Clearly the movie is inferring that Newton 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 changed the BPP 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 indirect-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).

As the excerpt explains, while BPP members congregated and worked on publishing articles and newspapers Dylan was played aloud on records; all of which were 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. Members at these Black Panther Party meetings surrounded themselves with the music of Bob Dylan. BPP members interpreted his songs as stories about the current state of society which encouraged their movement. "Ballad of a Thin Man" is an example of one of those "stories which influenced the organization."

While there is an apparent presence of Bob Dylan's music in this Civil Rights Movement and the "cause" of the BPP, Dylan never openly announced an affiliation with any organization. The nature of Dylan was mysterious to those who knew and didn't know him. He closed his life off to the media because "nobody ever asked the right kind of questions," (Early Dylan).

The political disturbances caused by the growing Civil Rights Movement provided for much opportunity by folk musicians to send their messages on the situations ultimately as social commentaries. 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 states "[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). 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 the folk protest scene. Ironically, this album came during the period when Dylan was most frustrated for being referred to as a protest singer. 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). 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). The "hunk of butter" analogy in essence shows how Dylan was 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 claimed that he was not a protest artist, his music still became iconic within "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 enormous audience “Blowin’ in the Wind.” As a result, he was then associated with the Civil Rights Movement as well as the Black Panther Party.

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 continuing public perception of Dylan as a protest singer. The songs resembled those off his second album *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* because they essentially held to a similar “story-telling” theme.

Despite this, Dylan responded to his growing sense of obligation for his public persona 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).

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 women 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). 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 (Dylan, My Back Pages)

“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 a protest phenomenon. Dylan as the perceived 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. Here we see Dylan harshly confront the politicians and militarists 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 human 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 replies:

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 (Dylan, A Hard Rain's a-Gonna
Fall)

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 essentially warning about.

There is a relationship between the social unrest and political injustices of the early 1960s and the music of Bob Dylan. The poems those of the time sang were of peace and while he claimed these to be “acts 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; they showed others what was going on 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. As Jim Marshall, a photographer and contemporary of Dylan's, states,

Even then at the Newport folk festival in 1963 he was a solitary
man, following his own muses, walking around backstage, not

being bothered by nothing. I think he was just beginning to become aware of the impact his music was having on the whole generation

(Early Dylan)

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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