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“The Times They Are A-Changin’”: Bob Dylan and Urban Poetry

Sudev Pratim Basu

Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan

To begin with, it is really a daunting task for someone to attempt to map, categorise and pin down Dylan’s poems and songs to any *one* particular socio-cultural matrix. The problem intensifies when one tries to separate his poems from his songs, and vice versa. They are symbiotic and we cannot ‘read’ one without reference to the other. Which one is the ‘center’ and which is the ‘periphery’ is difficult to ascertain, especially with such a chameleon-esque poet-singer-song-writer like Dylan. Throughout his career as a cult-guru of marginalised voices who ‘abandoned’ the purist path for the lure of ‘electronica’ and the mainstream, Dylan has continuously re-defined himself and his cultural alignments almost as if to challenge the Dylan-baiters; and, in the process, has achieved a near immortal ‘parallel’ status which is almost exclusively his own.

Over the years Dylan has tacitly encouraged myths and anecdotes about his unconventional lyrical style – of writing and singing – and at the same time, despite the almost hysterical fan following, he has remained an intensely private and insulated individual. Guarding his privacy and poetical/musical copyrights like the proverbial dragon, Dylan did not hesitate to grant others his ‘words’ when he thought it fit, the best examples being his songs “Blowin’ In The Wind”, “Knockin’ On Heaven’s Door”, and “All Along The Watchtower”, made famous by Peter, Paul and Mary (Peter, Paul & Mary), Eric Clapton (Clapton), and Jimi Hendrix (Hendrix) respectively. A shrewd businessman with an uncanny nose for the market and the marketable, Dylan has used this skill to promote the greatest eccentric poet-singer of our times – himself!

This essay examines, with reference to a few of his selected songs, various themes of urban existentialism and the desire to belong: which taken together, is symptomatic of post-1950s urban, consumerist and capitalist ennui that gripped USA. It will also highlight Dylan’s position as the ‘counter-culture’ messiah – forever shifting his marginal position to accommodate social changes, perceptions and assumptions – and always speaking of social crimes and imbalances. All this has made him the ‘unacknowledged legislator’ of the so-called ‘other’-world. Dylan is uneasy about being appropriated by the establishment: political, musical and cultural. He hardly has any voice other than his songs. Intensely media-shy and interview-unfriendly, he has always limited his comments to his musical repertoire. Needless to say, there will be omissions and exclusions in this essay, as it is utterly impossible to condense his immense output spanning six decades into a single account. Much to his own irritation, Dylan has now become part of the

academia, where his songs and positions are scrutinised, analysed and bracketed. Given a choice, he would have liked to leave his songs to personal interpretation and reaction, and not have them hierarchised and canonised by the academic establishment. But, sad to say, he is the most popular modern poet in his homeland and almost all universities offer a Bob Dylan course, despite the official non-cooperation from the man himself. May I add the further disclaimer that Dylan's output is so vast that I have been able to incorporate only a few of his albums, and I feel I have done him much harm by such labeling.

Dylan's rise, both as a poet and protest-singer, coincides with the various civil-rights movements, anti-nuclear proliferation backlash, students' revolts, cold war and its propaganda, alternative/'deviant' sexuality awareness, the Haight-Ashbury hippie counter-culture, black-empowerment, rock music, communist enclaves, drug consumption and the general post-war economic boom that was responsible for the anti-establishmentarianism in vogue at that time; specially among the urban youth. Dylan has, gradually over time, consciously checked against appropriation; so much so that when the folk community began calling Dylan their own, he turned his back on them and embraced rock n' roll. It becomes difficult to categorise him musically too. He later rejected rock n' roll for blues and rock. His influences are vast and he has dabbled in everything from cockney rhyming rap to heavy rock. He consciously turned his back on the seminal counter-culture platform Woodstock, which took place almost in his backyard in 1969, and, unlike Bob Geldof and U2 front man Bono, did not make it an issue to be a leader of the West's consciousness vis-à-vis the rock community. His songs talk for him.

I'll consider Dylan's songs as poetry. We need not reiterate the harmonic co-existence between poetry and music. All proto-texts and epics combine poetry and music. Under the all-pervasive catholicity of orality and the oral tradition, the poet-singer functioned not only as an entertainer through his structured narratives, but also became, by virtue of his position as the 'voice', the social consciousness of his people, often providing a rallying point for the individual and the nation's politics of identity(s). Both poetry and music employ rhythm, rhyme and pitch, and also refer to contained parallels and private insights, open to their shared community, which, in the long run, help define spatio-temporal constructs of race, gender, class, habits and tradition.

Dylan and other protest-singers/poets of that period and earlier – Huddie Ledbetter, a.k.a. Leadbelly, Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger and Allen Ginsberg to name a few – followed this tradition of orality. The resurgence of the folk tradition and the folk song in the late 1950s and early 1960s is a telling symptom of America's almost religious rejection of notions such as social welfare and social ghettoisation. The mantra of the time was: return to the pastoral, rural and personal roots through the bard. This almost dichotomous divide whereby the insurgence of the pastoral is located in the urban conglomerates is perhaps the reason why Dylan, protest-songs, folk-rock and its peripherals were seen as

aberrations, not as reflective of the general bias towards the idyllic and the idealist. Dylan’s ultra marginality – born Robert Allen Zimmerman into a Jewish family in backward Minnesota, running away from home at the age of ten, apprenticing with a travelling circus in Texas, barely making pass grade in elementary school, dropping out of university – his lack of a proper occupation and his extreme obsession with the eccentric Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, led him early in life to distrust success. Having seen his father crippled by hard work, Dylan had no problem grasping the problem of working class America from within: “My father never walked right again, and suffered much pain his whole life”, said Bob. “I never understood this until much later, but it must have been hard for him” (Sounes 16). Naturally, he made music his first-choice career.

Dylan had learnt to play the guitar and the harmonica while at school. He was already performing in school bands at pubs and coffee houses. The close camaraderie of these dim-lit places where the informal atmosphere brought out the best in him: the ability to connect while singing about the inability to connect. The essential performance-roots still lie heavily with him – even today. Though celebrated as a concert or arena performer – having enjoyed tremendous success with live albums and mega-bucks collaborations – Dylan prefers small enclosed spaces with a few ‘interested’ listeners, people he can see and connect to like in his early albums; from his later days, the best example is the multi-platinum selling album *MTV Unplugged*. This, the modern equivalent of the oral tradition – a man with a guitar, harmonica and a voice, albeit backed by a band that does its utmost to remain invisible both musically and visually – is where Dylan’s entry into the world of poetry can be located.

The Spatial Paradigm

After wandering through the American hinterland in search of inspiration and idols – Hank Williams, Woody Guthrie, Jesse Fuller; Arthur Rimbaud and John Keats – Dylan landed up with the folk community of Greenwich Village in New York City in January 1961: “Long ago, when New York City was affordable, people who felt they didn’t fit into the mainstream, could take a chance and head there from wherever they were. Bob Dylan came east from Minnesota in the winter of 1961 and made his way downtown to Greenwich Village. Like countless others before him, he came to shed the constricted definition of his birthplace and the confinement of his past” (Rotolo 13), says his long-time (early) girlfriend Susan Elizabeth Rotolo, forever immortalised as the girl in Dylan’s arms as they walk down the street in the cover of his second album *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* in 1963. He immediately made a huge impact in this burgeoning hub of counter-cultures with his caustic remarks, unconventional takes on song-themes and the lacerating vocal intensity of his ‘attacks’ at social hypocrisy through his bluesy folk songs – much of which were cover versions of existing songs. He played at small venues and his eccentric charisma and dedication to social change brought him

fans, both the ordinary and the elite. Joan Baez, already an established protest-singer, recognized his worth and brought him to perform with her at protest gatherings and street corners: “It would be a serious mistake, however, to underestimate Baez’s importance as an artist. She was a decisive figure on the American folk scene and helped bring that music to a huge mainstream audience. In addition, she introduced many superb songwriters at that audience as well, most notably Bob Dylan” (DeCurtis xiii). Overshadowing his mentor, Dylan soon forged a new path for the specialised folk song, giving it a much-needed popular feel of angst, and introduced a raw edge to the otherwise placid songs. After he opened a concert for Blues legend John Lee Hooker, Dylan was ‘spotted’ and signed up with Columbia Records. His eponymously titled first album was released in 1962 – an eclectic collection of standard authentic folk with only two originals. Since then Dylan has come a long way.

His poetic-songs have been compared to Homeric and Roman ‘rhapsodes’, and he has been nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature every year since 1996 – and the precedent shown for arguing Dylan’s case is Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore – another poet-song-writer who easily straddles the twin worlds of poetry and music. In fact Joan Baez uses a Tagore quote to begin her preface of her memoir: “God respects me when I work. He loves me when I sing” (Baez xxv). Dylan’s earliest songs, from his pre-recording-contract days, speak of travel – in search of kindred feelings, brotherhood and home – and disillusionment with the big city:

Rambling out of the wild west/
Leaving the towns I love best/
Thought I’d seen some ups and down/
’Till I come into New York town/
People going down to the ground/
Building going up to the sky... Well, I got a harmonica
job begun to play/
Blowing my lungs out for a dollar a day/
I blowed inside out and upside down...
Dollar a day’s worth... That some people rob you
with a fountain pen/
It don’t take too long to find out/
Just what he was talking about/
A lot of people don’t have much food on their table/
But they got a lot of forks and knives/
And they gotta cut something. So one morning
when the sun was warm/
I rambled out of New York town/
Pulled my cap down over my eyes/
And headed out for the western skies/
So long New York/
Howdy, East Orange. (*Bob Dylan*).

This is one of the earliest songs Dylan wrote – “Talkin’ New York”. Its history is a bit hazy, but it was probably penned in 1961, or earlier. The song talks about a naïve view of the big bad city seen from a country hillbilly’s point of view. The loosely structured narrative is a direct first-person account of the exodus which had been undertaken by many people especially after the post-war economic boom. They left their homes in their beloved small towns and villages and headed to the Big City for the American Dream. But the illusion was short-lived and brutal. The city was a place of oppression, struggle and anonymity – the postmodern invisible small person was unable to cope with the sophistication of the city and its rules of survival, and turned back home. This is interesting because

Dylan himself did not go back, but stayed on, fought it out with ‘dollar a day’s worth.’ Incidentally, New York – the prime suspect in Western postmodern urban alienation – figures prominently in Dylan. Another song from his early days – “Hard Times In New York Town” – underlines the social disparity, the unequal distribution of wealth, status and opportunity:

Old New York City is a friendly old town/ From Washington Heights to Harlem on down... They’ll kick you when you’re up and knock you when you’re down/ It’s hard times from the country/ Livin’ down in New York town... If you got a lot o’ money you can make yourself merry/ If you only got a nickel, it’s the Staten Island Ferry/ And it’s hard times from the country/ Livin’ down in New York town... You c’n listen to m’ story, listen to m’ song/ You c’n step on my name, you c’n try ‘n’ get me beat/ When I leave New York, I’ll be standin’ on my feet... (*Bootleg I*).

This is the typical Dylan. The direct reference to the listener, including him within his circle of sympathy/antipathy, the raw impolite ungrammatical English, the socialist and/or communist undertones – these were the first Dylan-esque attacks at the Establishment. The visceral hatred for the City and crass commercialisation found many a taker in those hard times. The war – Vietnam – was yet to figure in his songs. His first site of political awareness in his songs was the City: usually the anonymous, cold, commercial, East Coast cities. The poverty, death, callousness and lack of dignity of the common man are shockingly portrayed in another early song, called “Man On The Street”:

I’ll sing you a song, it ain’t very long/ ‘Bout an old man who never done wrong/ How he died nobody can say/ They found him dead in the street one-day. Well, the crowd, they gathered one fine morn’... There on the sidewalk he did lay/ They stopped ‘n’ stared ‘n’ walked their way. Well, the p’liceman come and he looked around/ “Get up, old man, or I’m a’takin’ you down”... Well, he jabbed him again and loudly said/ “Call the wagon; this man is Dead”/ The wagon come, they loaded him in/ I never saw the man again. I’ve sung you my song, it ain’t very long/ ‘Bout an old man who never done wrong/ How he died nobody can say/ They found him dead in the street one-day. (*Bootleg I*).

This is one of Dylan’s most direct songs aimed at highlighting homelessness and the utter desperation of the aged and the poor especially in a big city where they are seen as signs of failure – personal as well as collective – and ignored with utter disdain. The sting of this song – aimed at the listener in a direct frontal attack – is starkly highlighted with the raspy vocals and the jangling guitar and harmonica lines that almost paint the picture of the homeless man dying uncared for on the streets of the biggest and most ‘successful’ city in the USA. These three early songs are symbolic of Dylan’s non-urban background. The common refrain in these songs is the acute country-city divide. The wide-eyed country bumpkin has seen through the hypocrisy and charade of civilised society, and is keen to leave it

behind, at least metaphorically if not literally. This is another facet of Dylan that baffles the listener and the critic – if these urban spaces are not conducive to simplistic lifestyles, then why doesn't the poet-singer leave? The answer I hazard is that for Dylan, and others like him living on the verge of acceptability and making a career out of speaking out and for these problems and people, the city *is* essential to the development, growth and popularity of this particular tone of protest-voicing, be it through candle-lit marches or popular songs. The city and/in popular music is too great a subject for me to handle in this essay, but Dylan and others, fed *off* the city, which almost assumes a kind of postmodern intellectual limbo: I hate the city, but in the voicing of my hatred, I find my vocation; hence I exist.

Pacifist Dis-connectivity

Dylan joined the anti-war bandwagon in a major way – as far as his recordings are concerned – only in 1963. His classic indictment of war and war mongering became an instant popular street refrain cutting across race and national divides. Called appropriately “Masters Of War”, this song aptly sums up the contemporary attitude towards war. This song from 1963 was overshadowed by another song from the same album which also talked about freedom and peace – the cult song “Blowin’ In The Wind”. But “Masters Of War” is a chilling reminder of *realpolitik* where the angst is internalised against the numerous ‘official’ home-grown enemies who collaborated in the war for personal gain at the expense of the common-man’s body-bags. This song touched a chord amongst the young people especially the urban youth and draftees, who saw in this song the betrayal of the promises of the modern Free America. This song has lyrical affiliation with the war poetry of the First World War, especially with Wilfred Owen – “The Send-Off” in particular:

Come you masters of war/ You that build all the guns/ You that build the death planes/ You that build all the bombs/ You that hide behind walls/ You that hide behind desks/ I just want you to know/ I can see through your masks. You that never done nothin’/ But build to destroy/ You play with my world/ Like It’s your little toy/ You put a gun in my hand/ And you hide from my eyes/ And you turn and run farther/ When the fast bullets fly. Like Judas of old/ You lie and deceive... But I see through your eyes/ And I see through your brain/ Like I see through the water/ That runs down my drain... When the death count gets higher/ You hide in your mansion/ As young people’s Blood/ Flows out of their bodies/ And is buried in the mud... For threatening my baby/ Unborn and unnamed/ You ain’t worth the blood/ That runs in your veins... You might say that I’m young/ You might say I’m unlearned/ But there’s one thing I know/ Though I’m younger than you/ That even Jesus would never/ Forgive what you do. Let me ask you one question/ Is your money that good/ Will it buy you forgiveness... I think you will find/ When your death takes its toll/ All the money you made/ Will

never buy back your soul. And I hope that you die/ And your death’ll come soon/ I will follow your casket In the pale afternoon/ And I’ll watch while you’re lowered/ Down to your deathbed/ And I’ll stand over your grave/ ’Til I’m sure that you’re dead. (*The Freewheelin’*).

Dylan’s recordings in the early 1960s were an eclectic outpouring of anti-war songs (the ones mentioned above), alienation (“Down The Highway”), death (“See That My Grave Kept Clean”, a cover version of a Lemon Jefferson song) and God and established religion (“With God On Our Side”). But in the mid-60s, Dylan began writing the poems about human relationships which defined the postmodern inability to connect with people – people you loved, people you have lived with for a long time but cannot comprehend. It is to be noted here that Dylan himself went through a series of personal relationships during this time – the most high-profile being the one with fellow poet-singer Joan Baez, a roller-coaster on-off affair that was as much musical as emotional. The first song from his 1964 album, appropriately titled *Another Side Of Bob Dylan*, highlights this dilemma regarding love and control, and how emotional dependence is a kind of telescoped colonisation – of mind, and body – from which the poet wants to break free, *if* he can: “All I Really Want To Do”.

I ain’t lookin’ to compete with you/ Beat or cheat or mistreat you/ Simplify you, classify you/ Deny, defy or crucify you... No, and I ain’t lookin’ to fight with you/ Frighten you or tighten you/ Drag you down or drain you down/ Chain you down or bring you down... I ain’t lookin’ to block you up/ Shock or knock or lock you up/ Analyze you, categorize you/ Finalize you or advertise you... I don’t want to straight-face you/ Race or chase you, track or trace you/ Or disgrace you or displace you/ Or define you or confine you... I don’t want to meet your kin/ Make you spin or do you in/ Or select you or dissect you/ Or inspect you or reject you... I don’t want to fake you out/ Take or shake or forsake you out/ I ain’t lookin’ for you to feel like me/ See like me or be like me/ All I really want to do/ Is, baby, be friends with you. (*Another Side*).

This existential positioning is evident in many of Dylan’s later albums. Dylan was earlier criticised by critics as well as fellow performers that most of his lyrics were ‘issue-based’ and that he did not talk about the essential individual wrapped up in the modern society. Countering these allegations Dylan has, over the years, come up with lyrics that question man’s position in society from an acute angle of loneliness and internal displacement that echoes similar collective strains of the same vein. The notion that all relationships are powered and guilty of influence run throughout Dylan’s entire repertoire right down to the hauntingly uneasy “Lovesick” from the 1997 album *Time Out Of Mind*:

I’m walkin’ through streets that are dead/ Walkin’ with you in my head... Did I hear someone tell a lie?/ Did I hear someone’s distant cry?/ I spoke like a child/ You destroyed me with a smile/ While I was sleepin’. I’m sick of

love that I'm in the thick of it... I see lovers in the meadow/ I see, silhouettes in the window, I'll watch them 'til they're gone/ And they leave me hangin' on/ To a shadow. I hear the clock tick/ Sometimes the silence can be like thunder/ Sometimes I wanna take to the road and plunder/ Could you ever be true/ I think of you/ And I wonder. I'm sick of love, I wish I'd never met you/ I'm sick of love, I'm tryin' to forget you. Just don't know what to do/ I'd give anything to/ Be with you. (*Time*).

However, on the musical side he was undergoing a drastic transition – a transition that fans still bicker about. In 1965 at the influential Newport Folk Festival Dylan went electric (Shelton 301-04) with the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, which included Dylan staple Al Kooper on guitar. Purists were enraged and fans booed him throughout his loud set. But Dylan hasn't looked back since. His first major 'electric' release was the 1966 *Blonde On Blonde*, which featured such Dylan classics like “Rainy Day Women Nos. 12 & 35”, “I Want You” and “Just Like A Woman”. But the operative track from that album will surely be the surrealistic ballad of madness, sexuality, prostitution, voyeurism and rejection of the Godhead – provocatively entitled “Visions Of Johanna”:

Ain't it just like the night to play tricks when you're tryin' to be so quiet? / We sit here stranded, though we're all doin' our best to deny it... The country music station plays soft/ But there's nothing really nothing to turn of/ Just Louise and her lover so entwined/ And these visions of Johanna that conquer my mind... And the all-night girls they whisper of escapades out on the D-train... That Johanna's not here/ The ghost of electricity howls in the bones of her face/ Where these visions of Johanna have now taken my place... And these visions of Johanna they kept me up past the dawn. Inside the museums, Infinity goes up on trial/ Voices echo this is what salvation must be like after a while/ But Mona Lisa must'a had the highway blues/ You can tell by the way she smiles/ See the primitive wallflower freeze/ When the jelly-faced women all sneeze/ Hear the one with the moustache say, “Jeeze I can't find my knees”/ But these visions of Johanna, they make it all seem so cruel... As she, herself prepares for him/ And Madonna, she still has not showed/ We see this empty cage now corrode/ Where her cape of the stage once had flowed/ The fiddler, he now steps to the road/ He writes ev'rything's been returned which was owed/ On the back of the fish truck that loads/ While my conscience explodes/ The harmonicas play the skeleton keys and the rain/ And these visions of Johanna are now all that remain. (*Blonde*).

The apparent absurdity and images of languid decadence that pepper this song can be read as anti-Christian and hedonistic – but Dylan deliberately draws reference to absurdity as an artistic tool for emotional and existential ennui – somewhat like Eliot's “Love Song Of J. Alfred Prufrock”. Often regarded as a loose reference to substance abuse (like the Beatles' “Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds” from the 1967 epic *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*), this song is loaded with

arcane and personal references that make this longish track a psychoanalyst’s dream-project. The Catholic Church reacted violently against this song.

Ethnicity, Christianity and Marginality

Race was an area where Dylan was not as prolific as we might have thought he would be, given his status as a spokesperson for the marginalised. It might be argued that as his recording career chronologically mirrored the rise of the civil-rights and black-power movements, Dylan thought it best to leave it alone, knowing fully well that to his inner initiates, the bardic-voice also spoke for the blacks as it did for the whites. Dylan speaks for the universal-subaltern and not for any particular marginal, and that makes him open to appropriation by various peripheral groups who find in Dylan their voice, so lacking in modern music which is so enamoured of chart-rankings and market-saturation. Dylan does talk about the murders of the two civil rights workers in the caustic “Oxford Town”:

He went down to Oxford Town/
Guns and clubs followed him down/
All because his face was brown/
Better get away from Oxford Town. Oxford
Town around the bend/
He comes to the door, he couldn’t get in/
All because of the color of his skin/
What do you think about that, my frien’ ?
Oxford Town in the afternoon/
Ev’rybody singin’ a sorrowful tune/
Two men died ’neath the Mississippi moon/
Somebody better investigate soon.
(*Freewheelin’*).

In 1966 Dylan almost died in a freak motorcycle accident, and was incapacitated for a while. He returned the next year with rumours of his Christian belief and conversion with another hard-hitting album – *John Wesley Harding*: with an album cover featuring his ‘musical friends from the East’, Baul singers Laxman and Purna Das Baul, from Rampurhat in Birbhum, West Bengal, who collaborated with him in this album (Baker). In the song “I Pity The Poor Immigrant”, Dylan talks about the displaced peoples in America, mostly surviving on manual labour in the big city for less than minimum wages, and dreams of the home he has left behind:

I pity the poor immigrant/
Who tramples through the mud/
Who fills his mouth with laughing/
And who builds his town with blood/
Whose visions in the final end/
Must shatter like the glass/
I pity the poor immigrant/
When his gladness comes to pass. (*Harding*).

In one of his forgotten songs from 1963, Dylan narrates the story of how a young girl is seduced by a corrupt judge, in exchange for her father’s life; but the next morning she finds him hanging. This is based upon a real-life turn-of-the-century incident which Dylan read about in a report on courthouse abuses. This is called “Seven Curses”:

When Reilly's daughter got a message/ That her father was goin' to hang/
 She rode by night and came by morning/ With gold and silver in her hand.
 When the judge saw Reilly's daughter/ His old eyes deepened in his head/
 Sayin', "Gold will never free your father/ The prize, my dear, is you
 instead"... In the night a hound dog bayed/ In the night the grounds were
 groanin'/ In the night the price was paid. The next mornin' she had
 awoken/ To find that the judge had never spoken/ She saw that hangin'
 branch a' bendin'/ She saw her father's body broken. (*Bootleg II*).

Politics

Dylan became more and more vocal about how politics impinged into the cocooned world of urban homes and cracked the fragile walls of relations and emotions. Ever an acutely conscious man regarding politics and politicking, Dylan goes all out to show how even the common man is held to ransom by powers in the capitol and other high places. Taken from his 1989 classic born-again Christian album which subtly parodies Christian ethics, ironically titled *Oh Mercy*, "Political World" is as much a song about religion, or the lack thereof, as politics:

We live in a political world/ Love don't have any place/ We're living in
 times/ Where men commit crimes/ And crime don't have any face...
 Wisdom is thrown in jail/ It rots in a cell/ Is misguided as hell/ Leaving no
 one to pick up a trail... Where mercy walks the plank/ Life is in mirrors/
 Death disappears/ Up the steps into the nearest bank... Where courage is a
 thing of the past/ Houses are Haunted/ Children unwanted/ The next day
 could be your last... In the cities of lonesome fear/ Little by little/ You turn
 in the middle/ But you're never sure why you're here... Under the
 microscope/ You can travel anywhere/ And hang yourself there/ You always
 got more than enough rope... As soon as you're Awake/ You're trained to
 take/ What looks like the easy way out... Where peace is not welcome at all/
 It's turned away from the door/ To wander some more/ Or put up against
 the wall. We live in a political world/ Everything is hers and his/ Climb into
 the frame/ And shout God's name/ But you're never sure what it is. (*Mercy*).

By the late 60s and early 70s Dylan consolidated his stature as a rock star, a far cry from his Greenwich Village and folk-roots. During that period of rock and metal, with the invasion of the British bands, especially the three heavyweights Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath and Deep Purple, metal and rock usurped the urban marginal voices from rock n' roll and folk, and Dylan, always the survivor, hitched up to the rock genre. The New Wave Of British Heavy Metal (NWOBHM) included bands like Judas Priest – its name taken from a 1968 song by Dylan called "The Ballad Of Frankie Lee And Judas Priest" released in *Oh Mercy* – Def Leppard, Wishbone Ash and Iron Maiden, which dominated the 1980s and were influenced by Dylan, as both a musician and song-writer.

Over the years Dylan has released close to seventy albums – studio recordings, covers and adaptations, collaborations, movie sound-tracks and a whole array of live recordings ranging from solo projects to the now cult team-up with The Grateful Dead released as *Dylan And The Dead*. In 1970 Dylan penned the surrealist novel *Tarantula*, which received widespread literary coverage. In 1977 Dylan made a largely autobiographical film called *Renaldo And Clara*. In 1978 Martin Scorsese had filmed Dylan’s last concert with his back up band called The Band as *The Last Waltz*. Scorsese has already brought out the definitive Dylan biopic, with full collaboration from Dylan. The 2007 weird film directed by Todd Haynes *I’m Not There*, apt name for a film where six actors including women play Dylan in various avatars in private and public spaces, push the envelope of myth and fascination for this man further into this century. Purists consider his live shows as ‘more’ authentic and closer to his folk roots – the man, the guitar, the harmonica and the voice. But it will be a great injustice to Dylan to reduce him to certain socio-cultural positions. He is much more than a movement. He has changed and adapted with the times – lyrically, politically and musically.

Dylan has associated with the cutting edge of musical innovation and interpretation. He has collaborated with everyone – from Mark Knopfler to Slash, from Daniel Lanois to Eddie Van Halen, from Purna Das Baul to the televangelist Bill Graham. He has shared public platform with Beat poet Allen Ginsberg and constructed the sublime ‘Dylan-esque Republic’ with visionary inspiration from varied sources – William Blake, the Bible, Thoreau and Whitman, among others. His urban space is a cultural potpourri of different anxieties and the common man’s perception of morality, tolerance and normalcy.

My contention is that Dylan is essentially an urban socialist and reformer. Though he has dabbled in many musical shifts and has evolved as a musician since his earliest days, his lyrical paradigm is continuous. He needs the big bad city and social causes. Utopias frighten him – as they would render him sterile. His virility is directly associated with the psyche of success and progress – against which he rants and raves. He is the modern marginal, who seeks and seduces marginality to survive. His position in society is essential and secured for posterity. His initial underground success and later unease with that same success stems from the realisation that the erstwhile anti-establishment marker was slowly being sucked into the mainstream and was in danger of being made a part of the very establishment that he pilloried in his songs; hence the myth about privacy, insulation and isolation in society, outside of his songs. Dylan and his songs have become synonymous with the battle the lone individual fights against the Kafkaesque establishment. His songs are about failures and incompleteness. Success and holistic culminations are alien to his songs. He is the perennial underachiever, standing up for the rights of the underdogs in an alienated world of images and links which mock comprehension.

In the end, such a reading as this should not be seen as an attempt to belittle or debunk his status as one of the few cultural icons of our time who

occupy the almost mutually exclusive spaces of the popular and the canonical, the kitsch and the *Kultur*, the peripheral and the central. When all is said and done, Dylan will always be remembered as one who will

... tell and think it and speak it and breathe it
 And reflect it from the mountain so all souls can see it
 Then I'll stand on the ocean until I start sinkin'
 But I'll know my songs well before I start singin'.

(“A Hard Rain’s Gonna Fall”).

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