

# **'It Ain't Me, Babe'**

Bob Dylan, Postmodernism and the Civil Rights Movement

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American Studies Master's Thesis  
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29 June 2015  
15677 words

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## Introduction

On December 13, 1963, protest singer Bob Dylan was awarded the Tom Paine Award by the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee during their Bill of Rights dinner. The annual event celebrated an individual's effort in championing the cause of civil liberties and this time the honour had fallen to Dylan, for his contributions to the cause through his protest songs regarding the Civil Rights Movement, for which he had become an important cultural symbol. However, his acceptance speech, improvised after drinking heavily during the course of the dinner, proved very controversial. It showed Dylan's ambiguous connections to politics, in particular to the left of the political spectrum, and his rejection of being part of a movement.

And they talk about Negroes, and they talk about black and white.  
And they talk about colors of red and blue and yellow. Man, I just don't see any colors at all when I look out. [...] There's no black and white, left and right to me anymore; there's only up and down and down is very close to the ground. And I'm trying to go up without thinking about anything trivial such as politics. They has [sic] got nothing to do with it. I'm thinking about the general people and when they get hurt.<sup>1</sup>

He would also ridicule the board of the ECLC for being old and having lost contact with the younger generation, which Dylan was part of, stating: 'It is not an old peoples' world. It has nothing to do with old people. Old people, when their hair grows out, they should go out. And I look down to see the people that are governing me and making my rules – and they haven't got any hair on their head – I get very uptight about it.' To top his controversial appearance off, he proclaimed to have sympathies towards Lee Harvey Oswald for assassinating President Kennedy, just weeks earlier, to boos from the outraged crowd present at the award-ceremony.<sup>2</sup>

The speech marked just one of the occasions in which Dylan voiced his unease, contempt even, of politics. A strange notion for someone writing protest

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Dylan, 'Tom Paine Award Acceptance Speech' (16 December 2013), <http://www.daysofthecrazy-wild.com/watch-listen-bob-dylans-infamous-1963-tom-paine-award-speech/> (15 May 2015).

<sup>2</sup> M. Marqusee, *Chimes of Freedom: The Politics of Bob Dylan's Art* (New York 2003) 87.

songs about subjects like the Civil Rights struggle, which makes Dylan an interesting and very ambiguous person. Eventually, said unease would result in Dylan's turn towards a less political form of music, although he and his music were still often seen as a symbol for the counterculture movement and their protests and continued to be seen from a political perspective.

In his book *Chimes of Freedom: The Politics of Bob Dylan's Art*, hailed 'the finest book on Dylan and the politics of the 1960s yet published' by Louis P. Masur in his review for *American Quarterly*, Mike Marqusee traces this shift in Dylan's way of thinking about politics and his consequential turn away from politics, stating that Dylan had had enough of being seen as part of the Civil Rights Movement. 'Dylan was never an activist. He absorbed his politics, like much else, by osmosis. His contribution to the movement was limited to a small number of personal appearances, a few donations – and the songs. These, however, were an inestimable gift,' Marqusee claims.<sup>3</sup>

This paper intends to argue exactly the opposite, by showing that Dylan in fact was an activist, looking at both Dylan's political and artistic context within the Civil Rights Movement. The broader context of Dylan's persona will also be addressed, in order to place Dylan's protest era in a combined context of his artistic being, the Civil Rights Movement and the sixties. In this way, a complete picture of Dylan and his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement during this period, will be constructed. This objective culminates in this paper's main research question: in what way was Bob Dylan part of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s?

The subject of Dylan has been approached through many different perspectives, using many different methods. One of these perspectives focuses mainly on the individual Bob Dylan and his songs. For example, Christopher Ricks, in his *Dylan's Vision of Sin*, looks, as the title suggests, at how Dylan's lyrics reflect notions of sin from a purely poetic or literary point of view, while Larry Smith's *Writing Dylan* deals with Dylan's different phases and how his songs match these 'identities' – without necessarily putting these into a larger historical context, by the way – and Mark Polizzotti, in his *Highway 61 Revisited*, opts for a more musicological approach, putting his focus mainly on Dylan's music, rather than his lyrics. While all these

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<sup>3</sup> Marqusee, *op. cit.*, 86.

books shed a light on some aspect of Dylan, they do not put these aspects into a larger contextual body.

On the other hand there is the group that does try to put Dylan and his music in a larger perspective. The previously mentioned *Chimes of Freedom* (or the reworked and republished version called *Wicked Messenger: Bob Dylan and the 1960s*) by Mike Marqusee, which contextualizes Dylan within the Civil Rights Movement and the larger political context of the 1960s, Greil Marcus's *Like a Rolling Stone: Bob Dylan at the Crossroads*, which traces 'the American experience' within Dylan's songs, and Bob Batchelor's recent *Bob Dylan: A Biography*, which addresses Dylan's function as a symbol through recent history, are all examples of this group of Dylan scholars.<sup>4</sup>

Within the academic field studying the Civil Rights Movement, a revisionist tendency, drawing on autobiographies and challenging the history of icons and a master narrative, has emerged, promoting a bottom-up approach to the subject, in order to form a new dominant perspective, arguing that 'we need these untold stories [autobiographies] to understand the full spectrum of action, inaction, and reaction that constituted the movement and determined the outcomes.'<sup>5</sup> One could make a convincing argument that some of the Dylan biographies that have been published recently, like the ones by Bob Batchelor and Mike Marqusee mentioned above, fit perfectly into this trend of shedding light onto the roles of individual actors on the Civil Rights Movement.

This paper, too, fits into this bottom-up approach, which portrays Dylan as a young protest singer within a larger movement, thus contextualizing the individual artist Bob Dylan within a larger perspective of the Civil Rights Movement. However, this does not mean that the artist/poet/musician Bob Dylan himself will not have a role to play, as Dylan's identity shifts will be addressed within his political context, by combining both of the ways of approaching Dylan mentioned above. After all, in order to understand Dylan within the Civil Rights Movement, one needs to understand Dylan as a person first, since it was not just the political Dylan who was part of this movement.

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<sup>4</sup> L.P. Masur, "'Famous Long Ago': Bob Dylan Revisited", in *American Quarterly* 59, No.1 (March 2007) 165-177.

<sup>5</sup> K.L. Nasstrom, 'Between Memory and History: Autobiographies and the Civil Rights Movement and the Writing of Civil Rights History', in *The Journal of Southern History* 76, No. 2 (May 2008) 363.

Tracing the connection between Dylan and the Civil Rights Movement, this paper will feature three chapters. The first chapter will outline the theoretical framework of this research, explaining the important concepts of postmodernism and popular culture, particularly in regard to the representation of truth in media and culture. This framework will form the conceptual basis for the rest of this paper. Next, Dylan's function within the Civil Rights Movement will be addressed, focusing on the tradition of topical songs, his appearances at Civil Rights rallies and his songs forming a symbol for the entire movement. Thirdly, another chapter will deal with Dylan's turn from politics, arguing that his rejection of politics was not just the result of his unease with being part of such an institution, but that such a turn was quintessential to his nature. Dylan's influences, ambiguities and later identity shifts will be the focal point of this chapter, in order to embed the 'protest Dylan' within his larger artistic context. Finally, a conclusion will be reached on Dylan's position within the Civil Rights Movement.

In order to do all this, a diverse group of source material has been consulted. This paper is largely based on secondary literature, reaching from biographies to articles and insights on Dylan's lyrics. There will also be a certain amount of primary material, such as interviews, speeches and of course the lyrics themselves, which will be taken from Dylan's official website. Furthermore, as mentioned before, in order to create my theoretical framework, a variety of primary texts by authors such as Jean Baudrillard, François Lyotard, Richard Rorty, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman and Bob Dylan himself will be used, to put Dylan in a wider context.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The connection between the Civil Rights Movement and Bob Dylan is a subject that, academically, lies in-between several disciplines. Drawing on history, cultural studies, musicology and even some philosophy, some theoretical concepts are needed in order to place the subject into a larger academic context.

Since Dylan is very much a cultural icon, both in terms of his music and his person, the way popular culture is of influence on politics and political movements is a process very important to this research and needs to be examined before continuing to the actual topic. Furthermore, some postmodernist theory is needed to fully grasp the way in which Dylan forms his artistic persona, especially when discussing Dylan's turn away from politics and his protest phase. These conceptual frameworks will be of much use, forming the perfect starting point for this paper.

Even though popular culture is a frequently used academic concept, finding a definition has proven difficult for many scholars, leading to what Holt N. Parker calls a 'perhaps perverse pride' among scholars of popular culture 'in not defining their subjects.'<sup>6</sup> And when attempts are made at defining popular culture, they are usually very comprehensive. In order to avoid the common difficulties in defining popular culture, Dominic Strinati uses the following definition: 'A set of generally available artefacts: films, records, clothes, TV programmes, modes of transport, etc.'<sup>7</sup>

Parker, meanwhile, discusses the different elements, derived from John Storey's *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, common in the discussion on a definition, which largely turn out to be based around two questions, the first one being: what exactly makes something popular? Does it have anything to do with quantity or 'the people'? And if so, who are the people and what quantity is enough for something to be called popular? Secondly, most attempts at a definition have to deal with the distinction between popular culture and other forms of culture, like high culture and mass culture and the question to what extent there even is a difference.

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<sup>6</sup> H.N. Parker, 'Toward a Definition of Popular Culture', *History and Theory* 50 (2011) 147.

<sup>7</sup> D. Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture: Second Edition* (London 2004) xiv.

John Fiske offers a fitting model of the workings of popular culture, solving the problems posed in the search for a definition. Fiske states that culture is the ‘constant succession of social practices’ that can be challenged through a system of rebellion, but where normal culture configures this rebellion into products, popular culture not so much produces itself, but takes meanings and cultural codes from the products of mass culture.<sup>8</sup> He thus puts the burden of recognizing and defining popular culture with the audience itself and in doing so agrees on some level with Parker’s suggestion that ‘we may not be able to define it, but we know it when we see it.’<sup>9</sup> Fiske states that popular culture only becomes just that, when the audience, also known as ‘the people’, find meaning in it, particularly in the context of hegemonic power-relations. Popular culture is thus made by the people, in the context of an oppressive environment, as a tool for resistance against some form of oppressive power in a hegemonic structure.<sup>10</sup>

This model of popular culture solves a lot of the problems that Parker mentions in his article. Firstly, it defines ‘the people’ as those at the bottom of a hierarchic system of relations, looking to rebel in some way against an oppressive power. It also takes into account the fact that culture is experienced in very different ways by different people, which is at the root of the problems regarding the definition of popular culture. Fiske’s model makes popular culture into an individual concept and while the audience is still not necessarily a clearly defined group, it works within this model. The people is not an easily definable term and neither is culture, but the workings of Fiske’s model makes sure we understand their connection anyway.

Secondly, it defines the differences between mass culture and high culture. Where popular culture needs an interpretation from an oppressed audience, other forms of culture are defined by their way of production or quality.<sup>11</sup> The individual interpretation at the root of Fiske’s system makes sure there is room for overlap between the different concepts of culture. Differences between forms of culture cannot be made clear by making a black and white distinction between them, for they interact and overlap. The way of production and the quality of the product, another one of those factors difficult to define, are not exclusive to any form of culture. There

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<sup>8</sup> J. Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (London 1989) 1.

<sup>9</sup> Parker, *op.cit.*, 147.

<sup>10</sup> Fiske, *op. cit.*, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Parker, *op.cit.*, 151-53.



are a lot of blurred lines between these them and Fiske's model seems to adhere to this notion.

Thirdly, it shows the importance of the relevance of a cultural phenomenon for the oppressed group. Popular culture can only be examined in the context of its reading, because popular culture is made popular by the way it is interpreted by its audience. Relevance and meaning in popular culture minimize 'the differences between text and life, between the aesthetic and the everyday that is so central to a process- and practice-based culture (such as the popular) rather than a text- or performance-based one (such as the bourgeois, highbrow one).'<sup>12</sup> Popular culture thus has an everyday practice in which it functions and from which it draws, making it essential to study the context of these practices.

Finally, another problem arises in the often addressed overlap between mass culture and popular culture, which points to the 'western modern industrial society' as the origin of popular culture. The question whether popular culture originates from pre-industrial, industrial or post-World War II times is another aspect of the discussion not yet addressed here before. Firstly, the lack of data regarding earlier periods than contemporary history made research into earlier popular culture difficult and secondly, the different ways in which culture was and could spread in earlier times, often being confined to a single city or community, are not addressed either.<sup>13</sup> This rejects the notion that popular culture is older than that. These problems however, are also solved in Fiske's model, as the model is applicable to all these examples, without saying anything about the chronological origins of popular culture.

In 1979 François Lyotard outlined what he called *The Postmodern Condition*, the state of affairs in the sciences at the time. This condition was mainly based on 'incredulity toward metanarratives'. These metanarratives can be seen as discourses, which legitimize a certain philosophy or point of view, usually by appealing to 'some grand narrative'. This narrative then follows 'a logic which implies that their elements are commensurable and that the whole is determinable', an approach which is dismissed by Lyotard as modern.<sup>14</sup> The idea of a linear narrative of history, and teleological claims to absolute truth are thus viewed with extreme scepticism by

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<sup>12</sup> Fiske, *op. cit.*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Parker, *op.cit.*, 150 and 153.

<sup>14</sup> J. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester 1979) xxiii-xxiv.

postmodernist thinkers. Ideas like the ‘progressive emancipation of humanity’ and the ‘triumph of science’ are, according to postmodernism, in decline and no longer an appropriate system of knowledge in post-modern times.<sup>15</sup>

If we can no longer rely on these metanarratives, where then does knowledge come from? Postmodern theory argues that the media and popular culture form our view of reality and that they have become increasingly powerful factors in our sense of reality through history. Postmodernism is thus an ‘attempt to understand a media-saturated society.’<sup>16</sup> However, according to Jean Baudrillard, the media only present us with what he calls a ‘simulacrum’, which is a concept that ‘is never what hides the truth – it is the truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true.’ For the more radical postmodernist, reality is thus a construct, a model ‘of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal’, determined by a truth derived from the media and popular culture.<sup>17</sup> We experience reality only through this simulacrum, which also determines the way in which we define ourselves. This causes the simulacrum, formed by the media, to also have a big impact on the forming of our identity.<sup>18</sup>

The authenticity of our identity is further weakened through consumerism and capitalism, which is linked with individualism. Furthermore, increased technological developments make sure that traditional perceptions of time and distance are no longer valid, since we can now travel greater distances in less time. This, and increasingly radical social change, puts pressure on the traditional origins of identity, which focus on nearby factors, such as family and locality.<sup>19</sup>

However, there are some side-notes to be made. As suggested above, Baudrillard’s theory is quite radical. For instance, it does not recognize that our reality is not merely built on the information we derive from the media. Other factors still play a role as well, such as work and family. The importance of the media in this theory is thus perhaps somewhat exaggerated. It also fails to notice the fact that access to media and popular culture, as well as consumer goods, is restricted by cultural and economic factors.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, some argue that Baudrillard should be read as a science fiction, given his tendency to base his theories on a model of the future that is based

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<sup>15</sup> C. Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford 2002) 13.

<sup>16</sup> Strinati, *op. cit.*, 211.

<sup>17</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor 1994) 1.

<sup>18</sup> Strinati, *op. cit.*, 211.

<sup>19</sup> Butler, *op. cit.*, 117.

<sup>20</sup> Strinati, *op. cit.*, 228.

on an exaggerated view of the present.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Strinati points out a paradox in the role of the media, arguing that ‘if reality has really “imploded” into the media, how would we know it has happened? We could only rely on the media to tell us that it had, but why should we trust them?’<sup>22</sup> That is not to say that the media do not play an important part in contemporary society, but the more radical theory certainly has its flaws.

In a way, postmodernism can even be seen as self-destructive. Is the way in which it forms a set of ideas about reality not a metanarrative in itself? Is it not meant to show a way in which history is organized? It therefore suggests that one should also be incredulous towards postmodernism itself. There is certainly something paradoxical about that.<sup>23</sup>

The role of popular culture in postmodernism has already been touched upon, but needs to be expanded, given its importance for our subject. It all starts from the notion that today’s capitalism no longer has production as its main goal, as Marxism would claim, but is increasingly based on the notion of consumption. Previously, capitalist societies’ challenge was to ‘establish their condition of production’, in other words, to make sure people adhered to a certain work ethic, and take care of the necessary infrastructure, the condition of the factory machinery and the availability of energy and basic materials for production. Now that these things are taken care of, attention is turned towards the consumption of goods, and teach people a consumer ethic next to a work ethic, in order to be able to sell goods to them for their increased leisure time.<sup>24</sup>

Stimulated by these developments, more and more agencies have risen in areas such as advertising, design, marketing and public relations, in order to encourage more people to use consumer goods. The media and advertisements thus dominate a ‘world of signs’, in the service of capitalism to ‘synthesize our desires’, to make sure an ethic of consumption is acquired.<sup>25</sup> To do this, a language of advertisement is created which is increasingly less about the product and trying to sell

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<sup>21</sup> D. Kellner, ‘Jean Baudrillard’ in: H. Bertens and J. Natoli (ed.), *Postmodernism: The Key Figures* (Malden 2002) 55.

<sup>22</sup> Strinati, *op. cit.*, 228.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 223-24.

<sup>25</sup> Butler, *op. cit.*, 114.

it. Instead, a less obvious, more obscure language, not directly relevant to the product, has taken over, often hiding its actual purpose of advertising a product.<sup>26</sup>

As a consequence, a world has emerged in which ‘images dominate narratives’, a world in which images are increasingly important to how we see things.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, images are increasingly consumed merely for their own sake, rather than for ‘their “usefulness” or for the deeper values they may represent’, giving way to a primacy of ‘style over substance.’<sup>28</sup>

In view of this, popular culture has an important role to play in this postmodern world. Similar to the role of the media, popular culture is one of the sources that determine our sense of reality and our identity. It also fits in with the previously discussed notion of an increased importance of style over substance and the importance of the consumption economy, although it is important to note that when Strinati explains this, he makes use of his own concept of popular culture which fails to make the distinction between popular culture and mass culture, as discussed in our addressing of the model of popular culture by Fiske.<sup>29</sup> We have, however, previously determined that there are significant overlaps between the two concepts, and the differentiation between them does not seem to stand in the way of this idea by Strinati. The rebellious nature of popular culture can after all be selective and thus still adhere to an increased integration of popular culture and the consumption economy. Rebelling against one aspect of current discourse does not exclude the possibility of agreeing with another.

Popular culture thus plays an important role in the development of this world in which style is more important than substance. It is also closely linked with the notion that there is less of a distinction between high and popular culture within postmodernism. Postmodernist art is usually ‘simply unconcerned by the relationship between the formerly “high” and “low” genres.’ Christopher Butler mentions as an example two symphonies by Philip Glass, *Low* (1992) and *Heroes* (1997), which are based on the respective works of David Bowie and Brian Eno.<sup>30</sup> This development thus mixes up ‘high’ and ‘low’, forming an eclectic mix of different influences.

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<sup>26</sup> Strinati, *op. cit.*, 221.

<sup>27</sup> D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge 1989) 328.

<sup>28</sup> Strinati, *op. cit.*, 213.

<sup>29</sup> Parker, *op.cit.*, 152.

<sup>30</sup> Butler, *op. cit.*, 64.

Similarly, Andy Warhol's reproductions of well-known artefacts take this link even further, showing a typical postmodernist trait of pop culture. Warhol renders Leonardo Da Vinci's famous *Mona Lisa* into a joke, by producing an infinitely reproducible multi-image print of the painting and naming it *Thirty are better than One*. The painting's artistic value and its uniqueness is destroyed through Warhol's serigraph printing technique. Furthermore, Warhol would use this technique to make reproductions of other icons of popular culture too, as shown in his works featuring Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley, but also the famous Coca-Cola bottles, Brillo soap-boxes and Campbell's soup tins.<sup>31</sup> Warhol's work is the perfect example of how postmodernism can challenge the demand of 'substance' in art and even turn it into a joke, even about the consumer-society it is itself part of.

This shows the way in which popular culture and art are increasingly integrated into the consumer economy, through its own consumability and its use in advertisement. The lines between high and low culture or art are blurred by these types of crossovers, showing that content becomes less important, while the society of consumption gathers force.

Postmodern music is 'concerned with collage, pastiche and quotation, with the mixing of styles [...], with the rejection of divisions between serious and fun or pop music.'<sup>32</sup> Bob Dylan fits right in with these developments. His first album consists mostly of cover songs and he was even branded a Woody Guthrie imitator at times, for instance by 'traditional folk purist' Jon Pankake, who said to Dylan: 'You're trying hard, but you'll never turn into Woody Guthrie. [...] You better think of something else. You're doing it for nothing.'<sup>33</sup> He needed to find his own voice.

Now, while Dylan then had to move on from simply being an imitator, this did not mean that he had to write all his melodies himself. Fact is that folk music had a tradition of borrowing melodies and lyrics from earlier songs and many of Dylan's songs have thus been derived from traditional folk songs. 'The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll', for instance, is derived from a traditional Scottish ballad called 'Mary Hamilton', which incidentally revolves around a similar narrative as well. Similarly, 'Blowin' in the Wind' borrows its melody from the song 'No More Auction Block

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<sup>31</sup> Strinati, *op. cit.*, 213-14.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>33</sup> B. Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume 1* (New York 2004) 250.

(Many Thousands Gone)', a version of 'Scarborough Fair' was reworked into both 'Girl from the North Country' and 'Boots of Spanish Leather', and 'With God on Our Side' was derived from the ballad 'The Patriot Game', a song that in itself was already derived from the Irish traditional 'The Merry Month of May'.<sup>34</sup> The folk music scene, and with them Dylan himself, did not fear 'quotation' and borrowing, in fact it was the norm.

Nevertheless, Dylan manages to mix high and low culture in his work, combining musical genres like folk music and rock-'n-roll with poetic lyrics, some of them even based on the bible and authors like William Shakespeare. The distinction between high and low culture certainly seems to fade in that instant. Dylan critic and admirer Christopher Ricks sees several similarities and affinities between Dylan and Shakespeare, in a segment typical of his book, which has him exploring the meaning of Dylan's songs through a passionate literary approach not shy of several personal associations. One of the examples – maybe more of a hidden affinity, than an obvious quotation – Ricks gives is in 'The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll'. In the returning last line of each verse (barring the last verse), Dylan sings 'But you who philosophize disgrace and criticize all fears / Take the rag away from your face / Now ain't the time for your tears.' Ricks notes that the phrase 'but you who...' reminds him of the opening soliloquy in *Richard III*, in which the title character says: 'Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace...', though not 'as a matter of sources or allusions', but rather as an 'analogue, a place of power'. The constructions thus have a similar function, although they are merely similar, not identical, in their appearance.<sup>35</sup>

The fact that someone sees the similarities between Dylan's work and Shakespeare's work already makes sure that the distance between the two is bridged, given that popular culture is reliant on interpretation anyway, and that thus the distinction between their work – in terms of having a 'high' or 'low' label – is faded. Although this reference is only suggested, based on an association by Ricks himself, Dylan certainly had some poetic influences. In part one of his memoirs, *Chronicles*, he writes about how he got interested in poetry, through which he would break with the 'three minute song'. The long and complicated poems – he mentions Lord Byron's *Don Juan* and Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* – made him realize he was only just

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<sup>34</sup> Marqusee, *op. cit.*, 81, 55 and 67.

<sup>35</sup> C. Ricks, *Dylan's Visions of Sin* (London 2003) 226.

starting out. ‘It seemed like I’d been pulling an empty wagon for a long time and now I was beginning to fill it up and would have to pull harder.’<sup>36</sup>

Throughout his career, Dylan produced an eclectic oeuvre based on multiple cultural facets, drifting between a folk tradition that already involved the act of collage and use of quotation, rock-’n-roll – in itself already based on a combination of styles, among them blues music – and a style of poetry that adapted to many influences as well. In other words, Dylan’s work shows a clear postmodernist edge.

And it is not just Dylan’s work that can be seen as postmodern, for Dylan, as an individual, seemed to act on his fair share of postmodern influence as well. The role of spokesman of a generation, an icon of the Civil Rights Movement, as well as his rock star status after going electric on 25 July 1965, are all examples of the concept of ‘style over substance’ discussed earlier. Dylan felt misinterpreted because of his role as icon by people who merely saw the initial image of Dylan on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, without actually listening to his wider message.

Strinati notes the importance of images and signs in popular culture, ‘where surface and style, playfulness and jokes, and what things look like, are said to predominate at the expense of content, substance and meaning.’ Dylan performs a balancing act, especially after rejecting his earlier label of protest singer, in which he cares for his ‘artistic merit, integrity [...], authenticity’, which ‘tend to be undermined’ in popular culture, while also using humour and a focus on style to write his songs.<sup>37</sup> And while Dylan himself was probably happy to keep this balance, the way in which he was interpreted lacked one side of his identity.

Richard Rorty’s vision on truth is applicable on Dylan’s view of identity. Rorty states that to say ‘that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations.’ In other words, truth is a human creation, reliant on language, and does not correspond to reality, but to language.<sup>38</sup>

These truths, by which Rorty means metanarratives, are also the basis of identities and the rejection of truth thus shows a way of forming an identity without the use of metanarratives, which often align the public and the private. One of the examples he gives is that of ‘Christianity’s claim that perfect self-realization can be

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<sup>36</sup> Dylan, *op. cit.*, 56.

<sup>37</sup> Strinati, *op. cit.*, 213-14.

<sup>38</sup> R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge 1989) 5.

attained through service to others.’<sup>39</sup> Rorty feels people need to realize ‘the fact that there is no way to step outside the various vocabularies we have employed and find a metavocabulary which somehow takes account of *all possible* vocabularies, all possible ways of judging and feeling.’<sup>40</sup> It is thus language that determines truth and identity on an individual level.

Throughout his career, Dylan changed the language, in the broad sense of the word, of his public artistic identity. His protest phase saw him cultivating ‘an angry, defiant body language’, while wearing ‘relaxed, layabout kinds of clothing, signalling a critical attitude toward society and the world in general.’ His rock star phase saw him adopt a ‘blasé, aloof, ironic body language’, sporting ‘long hair and Beatles-style clothes’, often responding with ‘absurd/ironic answers’ to interview questions, an attitude which was recreated very successfully in a scene in Todd Haynes’ film about Dylan, *I’m Not There*, in which Dylan replies ‘astronaut’, after being asked for ‘a word for your fans.’ Later, Dylan would become a country singer, before turning to gospel music shortly after, both radically different forms from his previous phases.<sup>41</sup> The concept of recreation is important to Dylan’s identity, starting from the point where he changed his name from Robert Zimmerman to Bob Dylan. In the words of Stefán Snaevarr, ‘Dylan is a postmodernist who has (or pretends to have) multiple selves and lacks authenticity.’<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Rorty, *op. cit.*, xiii.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

<sup>41</sup> S. Snaevarr, ‘Dylan as a Rortian: Bob Dylan, Richard Rorty, Postmodernism, and Political Skepticism’, in: *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 48, No.4 (2014) 39.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.



## **Dylan & The Civil Rights Movement**

When *The Times They Are a-Changin'* was released on January 13, 1964, it elevated Bob Dylan's reputation as a protest-singer. Where his previous album, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* had been a mix of both topical and love songs, *The Times They Are a-Changin'* was first and foremost a protest record.<sup>43</sup> With most of its songs already having been performed by Dylan at earlier events, Dylan himself was already starting to retreat from his position as a prominent artist in the Civil Rights Movement by the time the album was released. Nevertheless, the album's title song became an anthem for the protest movement.

It is important to note that Dylan was very much influenced by singers like Pete Seeger and in particular Woody Guthrie, both masters of the earlier political songwriting. Guthrie's influence is particularly present in terms of subject, with Seeger once describing Guthrie's songs as being 'honest' and saying things that needed to be said about the 'lives of outcast and exploited people.'<sup>44</sup> As will become clear from the upcoming assessment of a couple of songs, the subject of the outcast was not strange to Dylan's lyrics either.

Guthrie, Seeger and Dylan all fit into a larger American literary tradition. Grounded on the ideas of German philosopher and historian Johann Gottfried von Herder, who stated that any national literary tradition and style should be based on its people's folklore, this American tradition was further developed by people such as Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson.<sup>45</sup>

Emerson, in his essay *The Poet*, projects Herder's concept on American Culture, looking for true American subjects. He writes that the universe 'has three children', which represent respectively the love of truth, the love of good and the love of beauty. A poet falls into this last category and it is his task to show those who 'cannot report the conversation they have had with nature', those who fail to see beauty or cannot put it into words, that what they cannot see.<sup>46</sup> A poet is the one who 'knows and tells', and in doing so becomes 'the only teller of news' and a 'beholder

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<sup>43</sup> E. Bulson, 'The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan (1963)', in: K.J.H. Dettmar (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan* (Cambridge 2009) 127 and 129.

<sup>44</sup> G. Bluestein, 'Folk Tradition, Individual Talent: A Note on the Poetry of Rock', *The Massachusetts Review* 11, No. 2 (1970) 379.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 375.

<sup>46</sup> R.W. Emerson, 'The Poet', in: R.W. Emerson, *Essays: Second Series* (New York 1888) 8-9.

of ideas, and an utterer of the necessary and causal.’ Finally, Emerson states that words ‘are also actions’, a quote which sums up Dylan’s activism perfectly.<sup>47</sup>

After establishing the poets mandate to promote the beauty of the surroundings, Emerson goes on to define this beauty as a subject for American poetry, concluding that ‘Banks and tariffs, the newspaper and caucus, Methodism and Unitarianism, are flat and dull to dull people, but rest on the same foundations of wonder as the town of Troy, and the temple of Delphos, and are as swiftly passing away.’ America can be just as full of wonder as the world of the ancient Greeks. Emerson goes on to find that ‘our logrolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes, and Indians, [...] the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon, and Texas, are yet unsung’, and thus provided appropriate inspiration and subject matter for American poetry.<sup>48</sup>

Whitman then went on to make a contribution on the matter of style, highlighting the importance of slang in a symbolist aesthetic, which was first suggested by Emerson. He saw slang as an ‘indirection, an attempt of common humanity to escape from bald literalism’, and a means to free expression, in order to produce a poetic language fit for a national tradition. This highlighted the origins of the national literary tradition from the idiom of the common man, citing groups such as ‘a gang of laborers, railroad-men, miners, drivers or boatmen’, as essential to the development of this idiom.<sup>49</sup>

Woody Guthrie’s focus on the subject of outcasts, workers and poor folk fits right into the American literary traditions mentioned above, and influenced Dylan profoundly. Dylan described Guthrie’s songs as being about ‘everything at the same time. They were about rich and poor, black and white, the highs and lows of life, the contradictions between what they were teaching in school and what was really happening. He was saying everything in his songs that I felt, but didn’t know how to [express].’<sup>50</sup> After hearing Guthrie’s songs, Dylan felt like he had found his purpose: ‘I said to myself I was going to be Guthrie’s greatest disciple.’<sup>51</sup> He even decided to go to New York, where Guthrie was hospitalized for Huntington’s disease, in order to

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<sup>47</sup> Emerson, *op. cit.*, 10.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>49</sup> W. Whitman, ‘Slang in America’, *The North American Review* 141 (1885) 431 & 435.

<sup>50</sup> C. Heylin, *Revolution in the Air: The Songs of Bob Dylan, 1957-1973* (Chicago 2009) 37.

<sup>51</sup> Dylan, *op. cit.*, 246.

visit him regularly and play songs for him, although he never really spoke with him ‘too much’.<sup>52</sup>

Still, Dylan felt like he should be Guthrie’s successor, and he did so even before he had actually met him, claiming that he ‘felt like he was saying, “I’ll be going away, but I’m leaving this job in your hands. I know I can count on you.”’<sup>53</sup> And while Dylan would certainly evolve from being a mere Guthrie-imitator, eventually finding his own voice, he would always see Guthrie as a big influence on his work, even referring to him as ‘the man who’d pointed out the starting place for my identity and destiny.’<sup>54</sup> This would also keep Dylan in the American literary tradition, both in terms of subject matter and style, addressing traditional issues such as inequality and poverty through his distinctive poetic style, often based on the symbolisms of this national literary tradition.

The spirit of Guthrie’s protest songs can also be found on the songs of *The Times They Are A-Changing*. One of the most powerful songs on that record is called ‘The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll’. The song was inspired by an article in *Broadside Magazine* about an incident involving a black woman, Hattie Carroll, and a white man, William Zantzinger, which was summarized in an unequivocal headline: ‘Rich Brute Slays Negro Mother of Ten.’<sup>55</sup> The article outlined the case, in which Hattie Carroll died from ‘internal hemorrhages (sic)’ after being struck by Zantzinger. *Broadside* also mentioned ‘speculation’ that ‘attempts will be made to get Zantzinger off with a slap on the wrist’, after the judge had ‘already permitted his [Zantzinger’s] attorney to claim that Mrs Carroll died indirectly as a result of the attack rather than directly’, highlighting the possible racial preference of the judge in charge.<sup>56</sup>

The article in *Broadside* differs significantly from the coverage the incident got in other newspapers. *The Baltimore Afro-American* reported on the incident on 12 February 1963, highlighting the unusual practises in the court case, while also mentioning the reason for what *Broadside* called ‘a slap on the wrist’. Quoting the assistant medical examiner at the autopsy, the newspaper reported that Mrs. Carroll’s death was caused by a brain haemorrhage, induced by ‘fear, frights, aggravation, or

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<sup>52</sup> Heylin, *op. cit.*, 36.

<sup>53</sup> Dylan, *op. cit.*, 246.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>55</sup> Heylin, *op. cit.*, 162.

<sup>56</sup> R.H. Wood, ‘Rich Brute Slays Negro Mother of 10’ (Late March 1963) <http://singout.org/downloads/broadside/b023.pdf> (4 June 2015).

anger created by the blow(s)', while Mrs Carroll suffered 'with hypertension and high blood pressure.'<sup>57</sup> *The New York Times* meanwhile reported Zantzinger's sentencing, highlighting the reduced charge in the context of Mrs. Carroll's 'history of heart trouble', and Zantzinger's use of racial slur during the incident.<sup>58</sup> Dylan's source proved to be quite suggestive, and even plainly wrong on some elements of the case.

It is interesting to note that Dylan's version of the incident does not even mention the fact that Carroll was black and Zantzinger was white. However, the origins of the song were widely known, which made the song very suited to be adopted by the Civil Rights Movement for their course.<sup>59</sup> Dylan himself, however, does not use the song as a straightforward indictment of racial inequality, preferring 'justice' as a theme over 'blame'.<sup>60</sup>

While the song does not stress the racial differences between victim and perpetrator, it does stress the difference in class. Zantzinger's wealthy background is shown in the lyrics, as well as his 'high office relations in the politics of Maryland'. Hattie Carroll's social standing is also shown. Her being 'a maid of the kitchen' and working at the event. As Ricks points out, Dylan also uses 'enslaved non-rhyming' to stress the monotony of Carroll's work, by using the word 'table' as an ending for three consecutive lines. These lines not only show the monotony of her work, but also the fact that all she could do was work near the table, as she could not actually sit at the table herself, stressing the inequality between her and Zantzinger.<sup>61</sup>

In the phrase 'on a whole other level', right after the 'enslaved rhyme', the word 'level' again stresses a distinction with the description Dylan gives of Zantzinger in the previous verse. Zantzinger is on another level than Carroll, socially speaking. Level may also remind of the – maybe slightly British – 'upstairs' and 'downstairs', which divided the living areas of staff and employer in aristocrat residences. Ricks also points out the connection of the word 'Carroll' to words that are associated with her. 'Carroll', 'table', 'level' and 'gentle' all end with an l, which

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<sup>57</sup> G.W. Collins, 'Matron Felled by Cane in 'Old Plantation' Setting' (12 February 1963) <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=JkxM1axsR-IC&dat=19630212&printsec=frontpage&hl=en> (4 June 2015).

<sup>58</sup> *The New York Times*, 'Farmer Sentenced in Barmaid's Death' (28 August 1963) <https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/b8/7e/cc/b87ecc8a7c2ba3e729714c761734db84.jpg> (4 June 2015).

<sup>59</sup> Marqusee, *op. cit.*, 81.

<sup>60</sup> Heylin, *op. cit.*, 133.

<sup>61</sup> Ricks, *op. cit.*, 225.

becomes ‘her sound’ and even forms her later presence in the courtroom through ‘gavel’, ‘equal’ and the returning ‘level’ in the last verse.<sup>62</sup>

When the word ‘level’ then returns in the final verse, saying ‘In the courtroom of honor, the judge pounded his gavel / To show that all’s equal and that the courts are on the level’, the association we have with the word level, and, in fact, the -l ending of all words associated with Carroll, is one of inequality.<sup>63</sup> The judge thus shows everything but equality and exposes the injustice in the system, which Dylan explained is what he was after in the song. The theme is again underlined in the last lines of the verse: ‘And handed out strongly, for penalty and repentance / William Zanzinger with a six-month sentence’. Ricks points out that, while Dylan sings the line with ‘exquisite self-control,’ it is the six-month sentence that is the main expression of injustice in the song. While he maybe should have sung ‘With a [pause: For Christ’s sake! Can you believe it?] SIX MONTH sentence’, all Dylan does is pause for a short moment right after ‘a’, before continuing in the same volume the rest of the song is sung, a very compassionate and engaged Ricks notes.<sup>64</sup> It is exactly this restraint, that Zanzinger maybe should have shown in his anger before striking Hattie Carroll, but did not. It was Zanzinger’s failure to do so that made him ‘doomed and determined’ to kill Hattie Carroll, to ‘destroy all the gentle’, highlighting the deterministic inevitability of Zanzinger’s actions through his inability to control himself. Here lies the power of those final lines, in this understatement of the song’s central point, the suppression of Dylan’s ‘righteous anger’, where Zanzinger failed to suppress his.<sup>65</sup>

Despite Dylan’s disappointment with the sentence, the song never shows any disagreement with the actual verdict. Ricks notes that one notable absent word is ‘murderer’, while this word was for instance used by *Sing Out!*, the popular folk-magazine.<sup>66</sup> Dylan does state Zanzinger was initially booked ‘for first-degree murder’, but then only complains about the sentence. As he would later state: ‘Who wouldn’t be offended by some guy beating an old woman to death and just getting a slap on the wrist?’<sup>67</sup> The song thus might not reflect all the events in a factual way,

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<sup>62</sup> Ricks, *op. cit.*, 225.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>67</sup> Heylin, *op. cit.*, 167.

but that is not of interest for Dylan, who wants to get his message about injustice and inequality across.

In the refrain it becomes clear who the audience is, to whom the song is written, namely ‘you who philosophize disgrace and criticize all fears’. Mike Marqusee states that while no matter in what way you look at them, ‘the words retain their mystery’, it seems as though ‘philosophize’ implies ‘to rationalize’ and ‘disgrace’ is simply a stronger wording of ‘injustice’, leading to the song being aimed at ‘the supercilious liberals who offer their sympathy, their “tears,” but little else,’ in other words: people who don’t do enough for change. Dylan thus feels that the time for patience is gone and the country can no longer afford to ‘go slow’ in these matters.<sup>68</sup> In the refrain Dylan points out that ‘now ain’t the time for your tears’, implying there is still time to do something about the disgrace. The song is thus a call to arms, so to speak. However, in the final refrain something changes. Suddenly ‘now’s the time for your tears’. because it is too late for action.<sup>69</sup> This again highlights Dylan’s theme of injustice, or disgrace, as he puts it. Only after the judge has let Zantzing off with a ‘slap of the wrist’ it is too late to do something and only then it is time to ‘philosophize disgrace’. It thus mostly addresses the role the courts play in the affair, rather than the role racism plays.

The role of the courts highlight that the underlying problem is embedded in the system: if even the courts, which are supposed to be symbols of justice, treat people differently based on social standing, how far have we sunken? Looking at the geography of the incident, we can note how close Baltimore, Maryland actually is to Washington D.C., the very centre of American politics. Where most would expect this kind of incident to have happened somewhere in the South, it turns out this presumption could not be further from the truth. This poses the question how deeply rooted in the system the problem exactly is.

While Dylan’s claim that the song is about ‘justice’ is defensible, it is also not difficult to imagine the song and the incident having a big impact on the Civil Rights Movement. Although the racial element of the incident is never mentioned in the song, it apparently never was a problem for the critical audience. Phil Ochs, a friend of Dylan and a songwriter himself, writes exactly this in his assessment of the song in an issue of *Broadside*. ‘The use of poetry is paramount to his effective narration, and

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<sup>68</sup> Marqusee, *op. cit.*, 82.

<sup>69</sup> Ricks, *op. cit.*, 225.

one of his most important techniques is that he always avoids the obvious', he states, praising Dylan for not saying something 'when it doesn't need to be stated at all.'<sup>70</sup> The audience thus adds to the song what is not said and in this case appropriates the meaning they find in the song to Dylan himself. Although Dylan must have realized that class, wealth and race are strongly linked with each other, such that this link drawn between 'Hattie Carroll' and the Civil Rights Movement was hardly avoidable, he never actually points out the element of race in the incident or in his song.

Similarly to 'Hattie Carroll', the song 'Only A Pawn in Their Game' deals with the fact that (racial) inequality is very much embedded in the system. While 'Hattie Carroll' deals with the courts and justice, 'Pawn in Their Game' is about how the white elite manages to uphold a system which victimizes the white poor as much as the black poor, in order to keep themselves on top in the hierarchy. Dylan uses the murder of Civil Rights activist Medgar Evers as a point in case for his statement that the 'poor white' is subject to the same system which keeps racial inequality up. The song appears to be inspired by a quote in *The New York Times* of 16 June 1963, supplied by Roy Wilkins, the executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), saying the 'Southern political system' had put the murderer 'behind that raffle'.<sup>71</sup>

Dylan states in the song that this system uses the 'poor white' as a 'tool', in order to create a hierarchy: 'And the Negro's name / Is used it is plain / For the politician's gain / As he rises to fame / And the poor white remains / On the caboose of the train'. Furthermore, this system of oppression is maintained through schools, where the 'poor white man' is taught to 'to keep up his hate / So he never thinks straight / 'Bout the shape that he's in' and 'with his fist in a clinch / To hang and to lynch', in order for him to be 'Only a pawn in their game'.<sup>72</sup> The white elite thus uses racial inequality to keep both the black and white poor down and stay on top itself.

Just like with Hattie Carroll, Dylan fails to get the facts of the case right in the song, especially in regards to his characterization of the killer. Byron de la Beckwith was hardly 'from the poverty shacks', given that he 'paid the \$10.000 bail set in cash.' He also didn't feel the need to 'hide 'neath the [KKK] hood', as he was a high-

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<sup>70</sup> P. Ochs, 'The Art of Bob Dylan's "Hattie Carroll"' (20 July 1964) <http://singout.org/downloads/broadside/b048.pdf> (10 June 2015).

<sup>71</sup> Heylin, *op. cit.*, 144.

<sup>72</sup> 'Only a Pawn in their Game'.

ranking official in the Klu Klux Klan and even ran for lieutenant governor of Mississippi four years after being charged with the murder on Medgar Evers. But, despite Beckwith hardly being a pawn, or poor for that matter, Dylan still kept playing the song with the ‘poor pawn’-characterization intact.<sup>73</sup>

However, ‘Only A Pawn in Their Game’ is not the case-study that ‘The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll’ was and aims much more to transcend the actual murder into an interpretation of the state of affairs at the time. Dylan goes beyond simply blaming, and instead looks to expand on his wider claim or theme.

Examining the lyrics of the song, Dylan’s intent to put his message first becomes clear. For instance, Beckwith’s name is never mentioned, keeping the killer anonymous throughout the song and this anonymity does not only show directly in the lyrics. Ricks shows that throughout the song, the ‘killer is reduced to body-parts as indifferently as a bullet reduces a body.’ In order to set a contrast between the cowardly killer and the martyrdom of Medgar Evers himself, Beckwith is no more than ‘a finger’, ‘a handle’, ‘a hand’ and ‘two eyes’. Dylan also stresses the fact that the shot was taken from a hide out and from behind, further highlighting the cowardice of the killer and increasing the anonymity of Beckwith.<sup>74</sup> Where the killer remains unnamed, Medgar Evers is named twice, to note not only ‘the name that is to be honoured’, but also ‘the dishonour of the bullet’, as Ricks claims.<sup>75</sup> It confirms Evers’s role as a martyr. And if that was not made clear enough, Dylan also sings that ‘they lowered him down as a king’, underlining Evers new status.<sup>76</sup>

It is also worthy to note how Dylan used the song himself. It was debuted in early July 1963 in Greenwood, Mississippi, at a rally organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Dylan joined Pete Seeger and the Freedom Singers to sing at the rally. Actor-singer Theodore Bikel, who suggested to Dylan to go to Greenwood in the first place, noted about Dylan’s motives that it ‘seemed a personal thing with him to be going down into the deep south’, that he was ‘distressed’ by the first signs of segregation he encountered, and that he even apologized ‘that he had so little to offer’ to some black farmers he met. ‘Only A Pawn in Their Game’ was what he had to offer, confirming the roots of the song in the Civil

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<sup>73</sup> Heylin, *op. cit.*, 145.

<sup>74</sup> Ricks, *op. cit.*, 173.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>76</sup> ‘Only a Pawn in their Game’.



Rights Movement.<sup>77</sup> Heylin claims that Dylan used the song frequently to underline his commitment to the Civil Rights Movement and to ‘validate his credentials as a civil rights activist.’<sup>78</sup> The song certainly has overlapping interests with the Civil Rights Movement, but Bikel’s testimony that it ‘seemed a personal thing’ shows that even though he was probably sympathetic to the cause of the movement, he kept his engagement on a broader level, a conclusion supported by Dylan’s digression from the actual murder in the song.

Ricks notes that Dylan had been courageous debuting this song in front of the SNCC audience, given the fact that the song tried to avert the blame of the murder from the killer. Dylan ‘was aware of how he might himself be blamed for not blaming.’ The lyrics of the song stress the word ‘blame’ multiple times, through the lines ‘but he can’t be blamed’ and the returning ‘but it ain’t him to blame’, but the meaning of the word is not as obvious as it might seem. The song shows what is wrong with American society, ‘with an anger that is all the more forcefully contained.’ The word ‘blame’ keeps reappearing until the last verse, in which the murderer is already dead. While Dylan puts his message first, this proves he does not necessarily think that Beckwith should be entirely without blame. After all, ‘a pawn is pressed to believe that the game is his, too’ and they are thus definitely a part of the problem. The word ‘blame’ thus has a very double meaning in the song.<sup>79</sup>

In contrast to ‘Hattie Carroll’ and ‘Pawn in Their Game’, the song ‘North Country Blues’ does not even touch upon the issue of Civil Rights at all. Instead it deals with the poverty and exploitation, in particular in the mining sector, as a consequence of the relocation of production. The song is written from the perspective of a woman who slowly loses everything she has in a mining town which is being closed down. First she loses her parents to the mine and to illness, after which her brother (who raised her) ‘failed to come home’ as well. When eventually the mine gets closed down, her predicament deteriorates even further. Her husband loses his job and starts drinking, before eventually leaving for good: ‘This silence of tongues it was building / Then one morning’s wake / The bed it was bare / And I’s left alone with three children.’ In the last verse she predicts losing her children as well, stating

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<sup>77</sup> Heylin, *op. cit.*, 75-76.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>79</sup> Ricks, *op. cit.*, 171.

that ‘there ain’t nothing here now to hold them’, now that the town is in decline after the mine was closed.<sup>80</sup>

The song deals with the issue of poverty as a consequence of the ruthlessness of corporations, only interested in making money, rather than the welfare of their employees. The mine closed down, because it is ‘much cheaper down / In the South American towns / Where the miners work almost for nothing.’ The song has strong autobiographical elements, Dylan being from Duluth, a mining town in Minnesota, himself. He was one of those who left the place, largely because there was just no future there. The ‘mines were just dying, that’s all. [...] Everybody about my age left there. [...] So leaving wasn’t hard at all.’<sup>81</sup>

Larry David Smith summarizes the album *The Times They Are A-Changin’* as a ‘strong compelling tale of a social system that victimizes its populace with impunity.’<sup>82</sup> This seems a just conclusion, as Dylan’s songs are clearly about more than just racial inequality. He wants to expose an entire social and political system that needs to change and, while the end of segregation will certainly help attain this goal, Dylan has thus been falsely attributed to the Civil Rights Movement to some extent. How then could Dylan become such an icon for the movement?

The answer to that question can be found in some of the other songs on *The Times They Are A-Changin’*, arguably even the most important songs of the album, the title track itself and ‘When The Ship Comes In’. The former would open his shows, with Dylan claiming that ‘my whole concert takes off from there’, while the latter finished them. They thus formed the context of all the other songs.<sup>83</sup>

‘When the Ship Comes In’ features lyrics on a ‘great eruption’, leading to a new dawn, in which ‘the sun will respect / Every face on the deck.’<sup>84</sup> Dylan uses biblical imagery to express the belief that soon a storm will come, which will defeat ‘the foes’, who will be ‘drowned in the tide’ and thus ‘be conquered.’<sup>85</sup> Marqusee argues that while ‘the ‘ship’ may serve as a metaphor for many things’, surely, in this case, Dylan can only mean the ‘complex of insurgent social forces’ sometimes named

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<sup>80</sup> ‘North Country Blues’.

<sup>81</sup> Heylin, *op. cit.*, 150.

<sup>82</sup> L.D. Smith, *Writing Dylan: The Songs of a Lonesome Traveler* (Westport 2005) 49.

<sup>83</sup> Heylin, *op. cit.*, 157.

<sup>84</sup> Marqusee, *op. cit.*, 7.

<sup>85</sup> ‘When the Ship Comes In’.

‘the Movement’, thus casting the song, like many others before him, in the mould of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>86</sup>

What adds weight to this conclusion is the fact that Dylan actually debuted the song at the famous March on Washington on August 28, 1963. The very march where Martin Luther King would deliver his ‘I have a dream’-speech before hundreds of thousands protesters from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. The surroundings of the song’s debut were thus very much embedded in the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>87</sup>

Unlike King and his hope of ‘reconciliation and forgiveness’, Dylan does not seem as forgiving. Stating that the foes will ‘jerk from their beds and think they’re dreaming / But they’ll pinch themselves and squeal / And know that it’s for real’, after which they will surrender.<sup>88</sup> Those in favour of change, however, will ‘shout from the bow your days are numbered’, after which the foes will be drowned in an aggressive and spiteful ending similar to that of the anti-war song ‘Masters of War’, which proclaims the narrator will ‘stand o’er your grave/ ’Til I’m sure that you’re dead.’<sup>89</sup> A striking difference between King and Dylan.

A couple of weeks after Dylan’s performance at the Lincoln Memorial, he performed the song again at Carnegie Hall, introducing the song with reference to the story of David and Goliath, stating that there were crueller modern Goliaths that would soon be beaten.<sup>90</sup> Apparently Dylan wrote the song after a hotel receptionist had not recognized him, after which he penned the song in sheer anger, as Joan Baez stated. Despite Baez’s account of the song’s conception, it is very difficult to imagine the song having a different subject than the turning of the tide in regard to the struggle for civil rights, especially while taking into account Dylan’s remarks at Carnegie Hall.<sup>91</sup>

Finally, the title track of the album, and arguably the most well-known of all the songs, deals with this idea of a changing of the guard as well. The song was written shortly after Dylan’s performance at the March to Washington. Heylin states that ‘one can’t help but think he might be singing, in part, to the stoic throng at the

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<sup>86</sup> Marqusee, *op. cit.*, 7.

<sup>87</sup> Heylin, *op. cit.*, 153-154.

<sup>88</sup> Marqusee, *op. cit.*, 7-8.

<sup>89</sup> ‘Masters of War’.

<sup>90</sup> Heylin, *op. cit.*, 154.

<sup>91</sup> Marqusee, *op. cit.*, 8.

Washington March who, on the basis of the film footage, remained wholly unmoved by that song's ['When the Ship Comes In'] stark warning.<sup>92</sup>

Dylan then digs into these people, who he first addresses at the beginning of the song to 'gather 'round.'<sup>93</sup> And address them Dylan does, to such an extent even that Ricks classifies the song as 'another of the great Dylan *you* songs', with the word used six times already in the first verse alone.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, those instances of 'you' tend to contain a certain sense of value, they are accusatory toward the people addressed, those people who 'remained wholly unmoved' and who should accept that the times are changing.<sup>95</sup> This becomes clear from the start, in which Dylan, after telling them to 'gather 'round', tells his audience to 'admit' and 'accept' that these changes are going on, suggesting that they 'already know the truth that is being pressed upon' them.<sup>96</sup>

Similar to 'When The Ship Comes In', 'The Times They Are A-Changin'' depicts social change as a storm, but this time Dylan advises his audience to adapt to the circumstances 'Or you'll sink like a stone.' Both songs use biblical references for their imagery, specifically Exodus 15, in which 'the waters were gathered together', eventually leading to a song: 'Pharaoh's chariot and his host hath he cast into the sea: his chosen captains also are drowned in the Red sea. The depths have covered them: they sank into the bottom as a stone.' Elements from this line appear in both 'When The Ship Comes In' and 'The Times They Are A-Changin'', most notably sinking 'like a stone', and the 'casting' of a curse in 'Times', but also 'And like Pharaoh's tribe / They'll be drowned in the tide' in 'Ship'. Both songs thus draw from the same source material and have similar messages.

Dylan, meanwhile, seems to adhere to this storm, which bonds both songs, achieving its goals soon and embraces this development, while in doing so making himself part of this movement. This made the song, just like 'When the Ship Comes In', ideal to lift Dylan to the position of icon of the Civil Rights Movement, whether he wanted it or not.<sup>97</sup>

Dylan remains vague about the song's purpose, stating that this was definitely 'a song with a purpose. I knew exactly what I wanted to say and for whom I wanted to

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<sup>92</sup> Heylin, *op. cit.*, 155.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> Ricks, *op. cit.*, 263.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>97</sup> Marqusee, *op. cit.*, 85.

say it to.’ Ricks stresses the choice of words in this last sentence, combining ‘to whom’ and ‘for whom’, meaning ‘as addressed to’ and ‘on behalf of’, in a single phrase, implying that the song could be ‘on behalf of those whom it berates’, given that they ‘stand in need of them.’ Besides, both will eventually be the same, ‘For the loser now / Will be later to win.’<sup>98</sup> Also taking into account that they ‘already know’, as mentioned above, was the song adopted as an anthem by the wrong audience?

In the end, both ‘When The Ship Comes In’ and ‘The Times They Are A-Changin’ are songs that have a very broad meaning. Given the context that Dylan performed the songs in, especially at the March on Washington, it is not difficult to image these songs as being about the civil rights struggle. These songs captured the ideas of a generation, leading to Dylan becoming a ‘spokesperson’, much to his dislike. In turn, these songs provided the context for the rest of the album and for Dylan’s shows, which then made sure that all these songs were seen in the light of the Civil Rights Movement. While Dylan might not have wanted exactly that, drawing the conclusion that he was in fact not an activist seems wrong. After all, seeing himself as Woody Guthrie’s successor, Dylan was certainly trying to address social ills, racial inequality being just one of them. He even seemed to fit his cover art to his purpose, appearing ‘in a black-and-white photo frowning, wearing an open-collared work shirt and relatively short hair’, which was an identification with contemporary American workers and the political left.’<sup>99</sup> Dylan thus was an activist, although not one exclusive to civil rights issues.

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<sup>98</sup> Ricks, *op. cit.*, 269.

<sup>99</sup> D.R. Shumway, ‘Bob Dylan as cultural icon’, in: Kevin J.H. Dettmar (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan* (Cambridge 2009) 111.

## **Turn from Politics**

Mike Marqusee argues that eventually Dylan got to see his role as symbol of the Civil Rights Movement as ‘a personal burden and creative straightjacket.’ He further highlights that Dylan believed to be unqualified for such a role and thus wanted out, even though that split would never be absolute.<sup>100</sup>

This does seem at least partly true. In *Chronicles*, Dylan writes that reporters would ask questions about recent events, to which he would respond that he was not a spokesman ‘for anything or anybody and that I was only a musician. They’d look into my eyes as if to find some evidence of bourbon and handfuls of amphetamines’. He refused to be a spokesperson, because it made him feel like ‘a piece of meat that someone had thrown to the dogs.’<sup>101</sup> As mentioned in the introduction, Marqusee also states that Dylan ‘was never an activist’, thus playing down Dylan’s actual involvement and commitment, where there certainly seems to have been one. Dylan’s turn away from the political arena is essential in understanding Dylan’s involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. It reveals a lot about Dylan’s motives and of his opinion of the protest movement itself.

The last track from *The Times They Are A-Changin’*, the album which made Dylan into a civil rights icon, already shows the beginning of Dylan’s retreat from ‘message songs’. ‘Restless Farewell’ is Dylan contemplating goodbyes to multiple aspects of his life. Among these verses there is one that can be interpreted as being about the message songs he had been writing. In that verse he also confirms the authenticity of his involvement in the movement: ‘Oh ev’ry foe that ever I faced / The cause was there before we came / And ev’ry cause that ever I fought / I fought it full without regret or shame.’ However, he then goes on to state that the time has come to leave: ‘But the dark does die / As the curtain is drawn and somebody’s eyes / Must meet the dawn / And if I see the day / I’d only have to stay / So I’ll bid farewell in the night and be gone.’ For Dylan, a new dawn had arrived and he had to move on.<sup>102</sup>

This was made all the more evident when Dylan received the Tom Paine Award, as mentioned in this paper’s introduction. The speech that followed proved a

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<sup>100</sup> Marqusee, *op. cit.*, 92.

<sup>101</sup> Dylan, *op. cit.*, 119.

<sup>102</sup> ‘Restless Farewell’.

turning point in Dylan's behaviour towards the Civil Rights Movement and was essential to the rejection of his role as the 'spokesman of a generation'. While during the speech he does not seem to make much sense, partly because of his drinking during the event, certain hints are dropped. For instance, he stated that he wanted to accept the award 'in my name but I'm not really accepting it in my name and I'm not accepting it in any kind of group's name, any Negro group or any other kind of group.' He certainly makes a point of making it clear that he is not part of any group, but in who's name he is accepting does not become quite clear.<sup>103</sup>

Shortly after the speech was given, Dylan sent a letter of apology, in verse, to the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee, from who he had received the award in the first place. And it is in here that he explains what he wanted to say. 'I been told how they [people] eat, dress, walk, talk, / steal, rob, an kill but nobody tells me how any / of 'm feels... nobody tells me how ay of 'm cries / or laughs or kisses. I'm fed up with most newspapers, / radios, tv an movies an the like t tell me. I want / now t see an know for myself...' And it is this that led him to accept the award in the name of 'all other like me / who want t see for themselves...'<sup>104</sup>

In the letter he explains his thoughts leading up to his speech, stating that 'perhaps I should've sung a song / but that wouldn't a been right either / for I was given an award not to sing / but rather on what I have sung.' He goes on to affirm that 'I am a writer an a singer of the words I write / I am no speaker nor any politician / an my songs speak for me because I write them / in the confinement of my own mind an have t cope / with no one except my own self. I dont have t face / anyone with them until long after they're done,' thus renouncing his role as a spokesperson for a generation, while confirming that he stood by his words, even though they were just meant for himself.<sup>105</sup>

Even before Dylan had sent his letter of apology, the ECLC had issued a statement regarding the choice of Dylan as the recipient of the award. It read that 'it is urgent to recognize the protest of youth today and to help make it understood by the older generation. Walt Whitman and Woody Guthrie, the cultural antecedents of Bob Dylan, were not appreciated by their society until they were very old. We think that it

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<sup>103</sup> B. Dylan, 'Tom Paine Award Acceptance Speech'.

<sup>104</sup> B. Dylan, *A MESSAGE from Bob Dylan* (December 1963) <http://www.daysofthecrazy-wild.com/watch-listen-bob-dylans-infamous-1963-tom-paine-award-speech/2/> (22 June 2015).

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

would be better to make the effort now to comprehend what Bob Dylan is saying to and for the youth.’<sup>106</sup>

Notably, at one point during the speech, Dylan, too, mentions his affection for the work of Woody Guthrie, who had been such an influence on his career. Dylan said: ‘I wish sometimes I could have come in here in the 1930’s like my first idol – used to have an idol, Woody Guthrie, who came in the 1930’s (Applause). But it has sure changed in the time Woody’s been here and the time I’ve been here. It’s not that easy any more. People seem to have more fears.’<sup>107</sup> Here Dylan expresses his regret that his songs cannot work in the same way anymore as Guthrie’s songs did. It can even be read as an announcement of his move away from Guthrie-inspired message songs, and the beginning of his new direction.

On his next album, *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, Dylan writes another goodbye song, which Smith characterizes as the ‘professional’ counterpart of ‘Restless Farewell’. Where ‘Restless Farewell’ dealt with largely personal issues, ‘My Back Pages’ deals with Dylan’s art, announcing his ‘artistic liberation’ from the clutches of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>108</sup> He stated about his new album that there ‘aren’t any finger-pointing songs [here] ... Now a lot of people are doing finger-pointing songs. You know – pointing to all the things that are wrong. Me, I don’t want to write for people anymore. You know – be a spokesman,’ with which statement he underlined his new direction.<sup>109</sup> This stance is made clear through the refrain, saying: ‘Ah, but I was so much older then / I’m younger than that now.’ This can be seen as a farewell to ‘the old man’s dogmatism for a younger man’s subjectivity’.<sup>110</sup>

The middle four verses address different situations within Dylan’s ‘younger’ career, although they are distorted by Dylan’s newfound wordplay, which does not necessarily provide clarity concerning the meaning of the song. The second verse denounces his earlier method of advocating ‘simplified constructions of complicated societal situations’ and how he thus betrayed his own ideals through ‘lies that life is black and white’, noting that he had relied on prejudice earlier as well. The third verse lacks in clarity, but seems to address the prophecies ‘by corpse evangelists’ that come from the simplified constructions of the second verse. The third verse is ‘weak on its

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<sup>106</sup> Marqusee, *op. cit.*, 89.

<sup>107</sup> Dylan, *A MESSAGE from Bob Dylan*.

<sup>108</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, 56.

<sup>109</sup> Heylin, *op. cit.*, 206.

<sup>110</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, 57.



specifics, but strong in its sentiments’, in decrying past mistakes, Smith notes.<sup>111</sup> Here his wordplay reaches new heights, being ‘on the verge of gibberish’, seemingly adding lines sometimes just ‘to get from one thought to another without blowing the stanzaic pattern.’<sup>112</sup>

The fourth verse seems to suggest that words can have very different meanings if spoken by different people, showing the relationship between words and the context in which they originate. He suggests that he had put too much meaning in the word ‘equality’, which he spoke ‘as if a wedding vow’, in contrast to the ‘self-ordained professor’s tongue’, who ‘spouted out that liberty / Is just equality in school’, ‘spouted out’ and ‘just’ being keywords here. This proved that a ‘cheap slogan is meaningless in the broader scope of things.’<sup>113</sup>

Finally, Dylan recognizes that he fears that his songwriting direction would lead to him becoming ‘my enemy / In the instant that I preach.’ The insecurity, or confusion, about his artistic direction could even lead to ‘mutiny’. In the final verse he states that this threat of mutiny deceived him ‘into thinking / I had something to protect.’ Dylan ends with a reflection on his apparent sense of knowing the difference between good and bad: ‘I define these terms / Quite clear, no doubt somehow.’<sup>114</sup>

‘My Back Pages’ takes a stance against the tendency to use slogans, or simple renditions of complicated problems, to get one’s point across. Simplicity does not reveal truth and not everything is black and white. It thus ‘relates that reality is subjective’, and that this dogmatism is even dangerous for a future solution. Who is to say whether the new leaders are going to be better after all? Smith declares ‘My Back Pages’ a ‘pivotal song’, because it shows that Dylan has embraced a philosophy of subjectivity, fitting right in with his wordplay and mystification of his post-protest phase.<sup>115</sup> For Dylan, the song is thus a combination of announcing his new path and denouncing past mistakes. Furthermore, it shows a shift in perspective. ‘My Back Pages’ is explicitly autobiographical, where most of his protest songs had been from a more general perspective. From then on, Dylan would shun the topical songs and write songs from the personal perspective.

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<sup>111</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, 57.

<sup>112</sup> Heylin, *op. cit.*, 207.

<sup>113</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, 57.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-58.

Another one of the goodbye songs Dylan wrote on *Another Side*, is 'It Ain't Me, Babe', a song which professes a personal independence from a lover. Although this seems a personal issue, 'images of abused, defenceless people populate these songs', in a similar way as they did on the songs from *The Times They Are A-Changin'*.<sup>116</sup> There is something to be said for the notion that this personal independence is in fact another goodbye to the professional relationship Dylan had with message songs. The lover to which Dylan seems to be writing can thus be seen as the Civil Rights Movement, a movement looking for 'someone / Never weak but always strong / To protect you an' defend you / Whether you are right or wrong.' 'Someone / Who will promise never to part,' and 'Who'll pick you up each time you fall / [...] Am' to come each time you call.' Dylan had enough of being the spokesperson for the Civil Rights Movement and having to represent them, protect them, telling them that 'It ain't me you're lookin' for, babe'.<sup>117</sup>

Smith concludes that after Dylan 'solidified his standing with the protest editorials of *Times*, Dylan now says goodbye to it all with *Another Side*', declaring 'his total independence.'<sup>118</sup> He states that Dylan's albums maintain a 'mission-oriented approach.' Dylan seems to confirm this, while responding to someone from the audience shouting at him to 'Play protest songs!' Dylan simply said: 'Oh come on, these are all protest songs. Aw, it's the same stuff as always. Can't you HEAR?' This implies that he was still protesting, although he was no longer supporting the same cause as he was in his earlier career.<sup>119</sup> Supporting a movement like the Civil Rights Movement was no longer an option for him. He wanted to 'write from inside me', write in 'the way I like to write', words coming out 'the way I walk or talk', while he declared that he was not 'part of no movement' and that 'I just can't make it with any organization.'<sup>120</sup>

Dylan's new direction can be characterized as a focus on explicit individualism. As mentioned above, he embraced the 'philosophy of subjectivity' after *The Times They Are A-Changin'* and started to write from a personal perspective. However, Dylan had always been slightly different for the die-hard

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<sup>116</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, 64.

<sup>117</sup> 'It Ain't Me, Babe'.

<sup>118</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, 64-65.

<sup>119</sup> Marqusee, *op. cit.*, 199.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

folkies, due to not being entirely traditional. Folk music had always been dependent on its connection to the folk tradition, but Dylan ‘used such connections promiscuously for his own artistic projects.’ The personal songs included on his earlier records, like ‘Don’t Think Twice, It’s Alright’ and ‘Boots of Spanish Leather’, also account for an earlier interest in writing from a more personal background. When asked about tradition, Dylan said he ‘didn’t pay much attention to that. If I liked a song, I would just learn it and sing it the only way I could play it.’<sup>121</sup>

With Dylan now rejecting topical songs, he declared himself an artist, so that he could express himself, while folkies noted his new songs seemed ‘to be all inner-directed, inner-probing, self-conscious.’ Shumway briefly considers the different roles of an artist, ‘in the sense of Eliot or Picasso’ and a folksinger, declaring that ‘the latter tried to keep old forms alive, the former was charged with, as Ezra Pound put it, making it new. If Dylan had previously sung the news, he now sought to make news’, an approach which would eventually lead to Dylan making use of an electric backing band on one side of his 1965 album *Bringing It All Back Home*, much to the dislike of many a fan of folk music.<sup>122</sup> This shows that Dylan not only parted ways with the protest genre through lyrics, but through the music itself as well, while also changing his look. Dylan, to relate the matter to Rorty, changed his vocabulary, which meant the start of his new individualist rock star phase.

As mentioned above, after Dylan had departed from the topical song genre, he stated that he wanted to write songs ‘from inside me’. And in order to do that, he had ‘to get back to writing like I used to when I was ten – having everything come out naturally.’<sup>123</sup> This intuitive method of artistic conception, seems closely associated with the method of the Beats, a literary movement and consequential subculture, whom Dylan shared with, in Joseph Wenke’s words, ‘the aesthetic assumption that true artistic expression is the result of a spontaneous outpouring of the soul and that revision often leads to over-refinement and falsification.’<sup>124</sup> Ann Charters, ‘the *grande dame* of Beat history’, further cites Dylan’s ‘insistence on spontaneity’ as an important similarity between the two. Dylan confirms this notion, by stating that ‘I can’t see myself singing the same song twice in a row. That’s terrible.’<sup>125</sup> Dylan

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<sup>121</sup> Shumway, *op. cit.*, 112-113.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>123</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, 54.

<sup>124</sup> S. Warner, *Text and Drugs and Rock ‘n’ Roll: The Beats and Rock Culture* (London 2013) 110.

<sup>125</sup> Warner, *op. cit.*, 109.

pushed this notion to the extreme during the recording of *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, which was recorded in a single nightly session, with just a few minor edits.<sup>126</sup> He would simply refuse to do songs again if anything went wrong, producer Bob Johnston says. As soon as one of the musicians made a mistake, ‘Dylan would forget about that song and you’d never hear it again.’<sup>127</sup>

Dylan had first learnt of the writers of the Beat generation after graduating in 1959, as a would-be English student. Initially looking for a lifestyle similar to that of Dean Moriarty in Jack Kerouac’s *On The Road*, Dylan eventually realised that the appeal of this lifestyle was not that great after all, although he ‘still loved the breathless poetry phrases that flowed from Jack’s pen.’<sup>128</sup> After meeting Alan Ginsberg, a prominent Beat poet, Dylan’s interest in and association with the Beats started to flourish again. For Dylan, meeting Ginsberg opened up ‘a bright, babbling, surreal, self-indulgent, sleazy, intensely alert modern world,’ which would lead to Ginsberg becoming a ‘friend and sounding board’ to Dylan.<sup>129</sup>

Aside from having a direct association with a prominent member of the Beat movement through Ginsberg, Dylan also shared some of the same values, particularly their ‘attitudes toward social authority, politics, and drugs, emphasizing the primacy of the self and rejecting institutionally prescribed norms.’<sup>130</sup> On *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, Dylan is not only declaring his split from politics, he is also pushing everything else away, like the song ‘It Ain’t Me, Babe’ proves. This independence clearly shows Dylan’s commitment to individualism.<sup>131</sup>

Also drawing on this individualism is ‘Dylan’s fondness for the outlaw conceit that pops up throughout the history of popular culture and on which he was to perform increasingly complex variations in the songs he composed during the rest of the decade.’<sup>132</sup> It was a fondness Dylan shared with the Beat generation. In Jack Kerouac’s *On The Road*, Sal and Dean take ‘the route of old American outlaws who used to skip over the border and go down to old Monterrey, so if you’ll look out on that graying desert and picture the ghost of an old Tombstone hellcat making his

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<sup>126</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, 65.

<sup>127</sup> G. Marcus, *Like A Rolling Stone: Bob Dylan at the Crossroads* (New York 2005) 224.

<sup>128</sup> Warner, *op. cit.*, 110-112.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 108 & 114.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>131</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, 64.

<sup>132</sup> Marqusee, *op. cit.*, 89.

lonely exile gallop into the unknown...'<sup>133</sup> The outlaw represents the Beats' emphasis on rejecting the social norms and authority, in this case especially, since Dean and Sal find their freedom on the open road.<sup>134</sup> It shows exactly the individualist values that both Dylan and the Beats shared, promoting personal independence, while also making room for the more hedonist parts of Beat culture. The lonesome hero was an ideal for both Dylan and the Beats.

This notion can even be traced back into the folk tradition that Dylan knew so well. After all, Woody Guthrie had used immigrants to convey an image of 'mobility and freedom which comes from not being tied down to conventional employment', which strongly resembles the concept of the hobo, 'who for many years symbolized a Thoreauvian disdain for material possessions', and the outlaw.<sup>135</sup>

While Dylan certainly had some connections and similarities with the Beats, he was not actually part of the movement. Warner seems at peace declaring Dylan as post-Beat, placing him 'within a broader tradition without signing him up to the central credo, a set of philosophical ideas that had peaked by the mid-1950s and predated Dylan's emergence, even from his teenage phase. Ann Charter does not seem to agree, despite some anachronistic problems.<sup>136</sup> One way or another, Dylan was certainly influenced by the Beats, especially during his post-protest phase.

Dylan's turn from politics culminated in a change of vocabulary, which saw him change the focus of his songs to an individualist, creatively free and independent environment. Furthermore, this new phase featured a sceptical approach towards 'truth' and can thus be seen as the confirmation of Dylan's postmodernism. Marqusee, however, fails to address these characteristics in his assessment regarding Dylan's role in the Civil Rights Movement, despite evidence that these tendencies were already there before. The fact that they were makes sure that they are essential pieces of information in our understanding of Dylan's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, since they have determined his actions during this time. Instead, Marqusee simply states that Dylan felt creatively held back by his protest identity and was uncomfortable with his role as 'spokesman of a generation'.<sup>137</sup> While this

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<sup>133</sup> J. Kerouac, *On The Road* (London 2011) 252.

<sup>134</sup> K. Hemmer, 'Political Outlaws: Beat Cowboys', *American Studies Journal* 50 (2007).

<sup>135</sup> Bluestein, *op. cit.*, 380.

<sup>136</sup> Warner, *op. cit.*, 109.

<sup>137</sup> Marqusee, *op. cit.*, 92.

certainly seems to be the case, I propose a new view in which Dylan's postmodernist identity is accounted for.

Firstly, Dylan's rejection of truth returns in his tendency to answer questions about his work with absurd or surreal answers, thus mystifying his actual persona and body of work. Statements like 'I don't call myself a poet because I don't like the word. I'm a trapeze artist', certainly do not seem to help in coming to a greater understanding of the man and his work.<sup>138</sup> Another example of this came from a question by Nat Hentoff during an interview for *Playboy*. Hentoff asked: 'What made you decide to go the rock-'n'-roll route?' To which Dylan built an elaborate and complex answer, a story involving multiple cities, jobs and even a high school teacher, 'who ain't much to look at, but who's built a special kind of refrigerator that can turn newspaper into lettuce.' Ultimately, Dylan 'hit the road', after which the 'first guy that picked me up asked me if I wanted to be a star. What could I say?' Hentoff incredulously asked: 'And that's how you became a rock-'n'-roll singer?' Only for Dylan to answer: 'No, that's how I got tuberculosis.'<sup>139</sup> It becomes very difficult to pin Dylan down this way, and he has even suggested himself that he is simply playing a role, as he remarked at one point during a concert at Carnegie Hall in 1964 that it was Halloween and 'I got my Bob Dylan mask on.'<sup>140</sup> Furthermore, Dylan has stated that 'Nobody's Bob Dylan. Bobby Dylan's long gone', and that he does not think of himself as Bob Dylan, 'It's like Rimbaud said, "I is another."<sup>141</sup>

This shows Dylan's ambiguous stance towards identity, using mystification to keep people guessing at his true self or even downright denying he has an identity. This does tie in with Dylan's chosen 'ironic' vocabulary during his post-protest phase. The mystification, in a way, determines his identity. Language and vocabulary thus prove to be very important for the creation of a self. And a creation it is, given that even the name Bob Dylan is a construct. In *Chronicles*, Dylan talks about creating an identity, stating that he did not really have a concrete one when he first arrived in New York. His identity could be summarized by the lyrics song a song he once

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<sup>138</sup> Marqusee, *op. cit.*, 147.

<sup>139</sup> N. Hentoff, 'Playboy Interview: Bob Dylan' (February 1966)  
<http://www.interferenza.com/bcs/interw/66-jan.htm> (22 June 2015).

<sup>140</sup> P. Vernezze and P. Lulewicz, 'I got My Bob Dylan Mask On: Bob Dylan and Personal Identity,' in P. Vernezze and C.J. Porter (ed.), *Bob Dylan and Philosophy; It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Thinking)* (Peru 2006) 124.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 132-133.

covered called ‘Rambler, Gambler’: ‘I’m a rambler – I’m a gambler. I’m a long way from home’, Dylan writes.<sup>142</sup>

Following Richard Rorty’s assessment that the rejection of metanarratives constitutes a divide of the public and the private in regards to utopian thinking, it is possible to derive a notion of identity which suits Dylan perfectly. Rorty rejects the notion that ‘what is most important to each of us is what we have in common with others’, instead opting for a divide between ‘perfect self-realization’ and ‘a sense of community’, while the closest we can come to join these is to ‘see the aim of a just and free society as letting its citizens be as privatistic, “irrationalist,” and aestheticist as they please so long as they do it on their own time – causing no harm to others and using no resources needed by those less advantaged.’<sup>143</sup>

This self-realization is then based on Freud’s claim that ‘every human life is the working out of a sophisticated idiosyncratic fantasy, and as a reminder that no such working out gets completed before death interrupts. It cannot get completed because there is nothing to complete, there is only a web of relations to be rewoven, a web which time lengthens every day.’ Finally, Rorty states that one can only try to give shape to this self, for the little part that it is actually one’s own.<sup>144</sup>

Rorty states that an identity is based on ones beliefs, with the media again playing an important part in communicating morals and values to us. Dylan however showcases his incredulity towards concepts like truth and thus takes on a postmodern identity, an identity which Rorty calls liberal ironist, in which a person acknowledges that there is no foundation of political views and that we ‘have little else but our subjectivity to rely on for our judging political events and ideologies.’<sup>145</sup>

Dylan’s rejection of truth is thus an acceptance of subjectivity. This subjectivity then becomes the vocabulary for his identity, creating a context without society, focused on the individual. Using mystification Dylan blurs any idea of truth, maybe even encouraging people to think about identity, changing the vocabulary of existing ideologies, thus fulfilling his role as part of popular culture in a postmodern society.

Remarkably, Dylan manages to combine Rorty’s elements of the private and the public in his art. Dylan himself said about his post-protest songs that they ‘are all

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<sup>142</sup> Dylan, *op. cit.*, 55.

<sup>143</sup> Rorty, *op. cit.*, xiii-xiv.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-43.

<sup>145</sup> Snaevarr, *op. cit.*, 40.

protest songs. Aw, it's the same stuff as always. Can't you HEAR?'<sup>146</sup> This shows how he regarded his newer songs, while having a personal touch, still to be political. Marqusee, too, states that 'One of the extraordinary things Dylan does in his post-protest songs is to offer a critique of politics itself as a field of human endeavour.'<sup>147</sup> Rorty states that 'we could begin to think of the relation between writers on autonomy and writers on justice as being like the relation between two kinds of tools – as little in need of synthesis as are paintbrushes and crowbars.'<sup>148</sup> Dylan disregards this notion, Snaevarr states, for instance in the song 'The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest', in which Dylan warns that people should not 'try to revolutionize the world but just improve it by small steps by helping our neighbors carry their load', giving a seemingly apolitical song 'an ethical/political undercurrent.'<sup>149</sup> Even in his earlier songs, which championed oppressed and down and out people, this sense of privatized public concern plays a big role in his work. The spirit of Woody Guthrie in Dylan's work was thus a already part of Dylan's postmodernism. Furthermore, Dylan's activism in language is also according to the Emersonian notion that language can 'have measurable effects outside poetry, upon the economic, social, or historical order of things.'<sup>150</sup> The folk tradition thus plays an important part in Dylan's battle against the political vocabulary.

Dylan uses his art as a 'means of construction', trying to change the vocabulary regarding the political dichotomy of left and right, or even politics in general, in order to make it easier to come to a just society. Snaevarr believes that this is a successful method of change, since political vocabulary must 'somehow appeal to people emotionally', which is exactly what music does.<sup>151</sup>

All this happens within the context of Dylan's rejection of truth and thus his rejection of one authentic identity. Part of this was 'Zimmerman's lifelong capacity to absorb influences, pick and choose what was of value to him, and synthesize those materials into new forms.'<sup>152</sup> Dylan's near constant identity shifts were thus part of his 'private' postmodernist character, while his bridging of the 'private' and the 'public' was in fact a constant throughout.

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<sup>146</sup> Marqusee, *op. cit.*, 199.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 104-105.

<sup>148</sup> Rorty, *op. cit.*, xiv.

<sup>149</sup> Snaevarr, *op. cit.*, 44.

<sup>150</sup> R. Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Boston 1992) 93.

<sup>151</sup> Snaevarr, *op. cit.*, 44-46.

<sup>152</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, 11.



Dylan's battle for a new vocabulary regarding the political dichotomy fits perfectly with the notion of popular culture rebelling against an oppressive forces. A new vocabulary would prove a significant sign of rebellion against the current political system. Against a background of his rejection of an authentic identity, Dylan is found to be an activist against a political system that was oppressive in its vocabulary. Dylan thus was an activist, contrary to Marqusee's claim that he never really was. Again, Emerson's remark that words 'are also actions' never seemed more appropriate.<sup>153</sup> Dylan message, however, was packaged in such a way that it was not immediately clear what his objectives were. In true postmodernist style, the concept of 'style over substance' proved fatal for Dylan's ideas in Marqusee's analysis.

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<sup>153</sup> Emerson, *op. cit.*, 10.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has dealt with Bob Dylan, his role in the Civil Rights Movement and the influence of postmodernism on him. Dylan's postmodernist tendencies are vital for the interpretation of his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement during the first half of the 1960s. They form the key part of Dylan's persona and are thus essential to our understanding of how this individual fits into the larger picture.

Firstly, a theoretical framework was laid out, explaining how popular culture works as a means to rebelling against certain oppressive powers. The audience attributes meaning to a certain cultural expression, and derives an identity from it. This concept is in line with the general postmodernist view that the media and popular culture dominate our perception of reality. This situation originated from the incredulity towards metanarratives, a discourse legitimizing a certain philosophy through some form of grand narrative. Postmodern thinkers like Baudrillard believe that images from the media and popular culture form the basis of our understanding of the world through an artificial reality, a simulacrum. Confusion over space and time and the notion of style over substance are important elements of postmodern theory, and result in an art that uses quotation and referencing of older art, while also favouring the look of things over the actual content. This development was initiated by the increased importance of consumption in the capitalist world, and the increasingly important advertisement for it.

Dylan fits right in with this postmodern condition, most importantly through his use of collage and quotation. He frequently used (fragments of) traditional songs to compose new ones, while also mixing high culture and low culture in his work. Moreover, Dylan adheres to a postmodern view of truth and identity, by frequently adapting the 'vocabulary' of the self.

Secondly, Dylan's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement was discussed by analysing his most important protest album *The Times They Are A-Changin'*. While some of the songs were grounded in the Civil Rights Movement in some way, Dylan's themes were not necessarily derived from Civil Rights Issues, as became clear from songs like 'Only A Pawn In Their Game' and 'The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll'. Most of the songs protest against general issues of inequality, not necessarily racial. This is in line with a folk tradition, which, through the use of verbal impressionism and the use of America as a subject, managed to inspire protest singers

like Woody Guthrie to sing songs about the less well-to-do. Dylan copied this approach from Guthrie and would remain influenced by him throughout his career, no matter what changes in 'vocabulary' he went through.

On the other hand, the album's title track and 'When the Ship Comes In' were both songs with a very broad subject matter: the changing of the times. They were very much open to interpretation, which led to supporters of the Civil Rights Movement claiming these songs for their own purpose. It is because these songs were so easily attributed to different types of issues, that Dylan was hailed as the 'spokesman of a generation', despite his intense dislike for this characterization.

Lastly, this paper handled Dylan's turn away from politics, shortly after the release of his album *The Times They Are A-Changin'*. Dylan's new direction proved to be based upon a philosophy of subjectivity and a strong individualism, under influence of the Beats. His songs now were written 'from inside' Dylan, written from a personal approach, rather than the political message songs. Dylan changed his approach from politics to personal artistic expression.

Understanding the reasons why Dylan departed the Civil Rights Movement is essential for understanding how Dylan had seen himself within the Movement in the first place. Mike Marqusee argued that Dylan had become frustrated with the artistic cage that protest songs formed and that he was very uncomfortable with his role as spokesman of a generation. The more people wanted from him, the less he felt a part of the movement. This seems partly true, but essential to this paper's argument was the inclusion of Dylan's postmodernist behaviour in the discussion. Based on Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* Dylan proved to be drenched in postmodernist thought, rejecting truth and consequently identity, which is after all derived from the simulacrum replacing the earlier master narratives. Dylan started to integrate the philosophy of subjectivity into his work and adapted his vocabulary, both verbal and physical, to fit his new direction and meaning, as he had done before and would do many times after. Dylan's tendency to recreate himself, his identity, thus proves to be an essential part of Dylan's turn away from politics.

Dylan's activism is embedded in the conflict Richard Rorty sees between the private and the public. Self-realization is directly opposed to any form of solidarity and these two elements cannot be connected. With Dylan's turn from politics, however, the public and the private mix, as he combines politics with the personal, in an attempt to change the political vocabulary.

Marqusee fails to address the postmodernist tendencies which are vital to understanding Dylan and his role in the Civil Rights Movement. Consequentially, he comes to the conclusion that Dylan was not an activist, a conclusion which only partially covers the subject, as this paper has proven.

Dylan, in fact, was an activist after all, but not in the way many people saw him. Marqusee suggests that Dylan's involvement in the movement was limited, but present nonetheless. I have suggested that it was in fact the other way around. Dylan had a wider sense of activism, addressing a range of social and political issues in his work, one of which was racial inequality. The Civil Rights Movement was thus a part of Dylan's activism, but certainly not all of it. Dylan's work, and consequentially Dylan as a person, was then falsely attributed to the Civil Rights Movement, setting the stage for Dylan's shift to a less outspoken, more individual form of activism, mainly based on the notion of changing the vocabulary of politics, in order to create a form of politics better suited to achieving a better society.

Dylan's activism can only be seen in the context of his larger career, which was very much imbedded in postmodernism. Only then can we truly value Dylan's role in the Civil Rights Movement, or rather the Civil Rights Movement's role in Dylan's work. Dylan might have been perceived as a symbol, the truth is that he was not. As Dylan said to those who saw him as one: 'it ain't me, babe / It ain't me you're looking for, babe.'<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> 'It Ain't Me, Babe'.

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