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“This, That, & the Other VI” Bob Dylan: ‘A Complete Unknown’



*From left: Bob Dylan in 1963; Bob Dylan with wife Sara Lownds and children in 1968;
Bob Dylan in 2019*

At the risk of losing some of you right from the get-go, I want to ask two questions:

Who is Bob Dylan? **Spoiler alert:** there is more than one, but maybe **not**.

And why is he one of the most important American cultural figures of the 20th century? You could make the case he is *the* most important. **Spoiler alert:** it is not the catalog of over 600 songs he wrote that earned him a Nobel Prize in Literature. In true Bob Dylan fashion, he skipped the award ceremony. [1]

No, it is something he did a long, long time ago.

Since a unified theory of Bob Dylan might be a contradiction in terms, let's explore these questions by trying to connect some dots.

Dot #1. Openings. These questions occurred to me while watching James Mangold's superb Dylan biopic "A Complete Unknown," which Mangold directed from a script he co-authored with Jay Cocks based on Elijah Wald's book *Dylan Goes Electric*. The film's merit rests on the quality of its acting, its scrupulous evocation of a gone time and place, and, of course, its music.

Portraying someone who is still alive and whose appearance, if not identity, is well-known is a daunting challenge mastered by Timothee Chalamet as Dylan and Monica Barbaro as Joan Baez. They seem to have channeled their characters' alter egos so utterly that at times, you completely forget you are not watching the actual Bob Dylan and Joan Baez. As fine a job as Chalamet and Barbaro each do, the film's three best performances are by Elle Fanning as Dylan's first girlfriend Sylvie Russo, Edward Norton as folk music legend Pete Seeger, and Scott McNairy as a mute and terminally ill but still keenly alert Woody Guthrie.

Mangold, who also made 2005's Johnny Cash biopic "Walk the Line," smartly chose to let the music "do the talking." Instead of snippets and medleys of famous Dylan songs, Mangold, as Brian Tallerico at RogerEbert.com notes, wove "Dylan's music into the fabric of the storytelling instead of just using it as a soundtrack." [2] This approach puts a lot of pressure on the performers, who do not lip-sync but actually perform their songs. At the outset, Mangold uses the technique when Chalamet/Dylan meets Woody Guthrie. Their first meeting long ago became one of the mythic moments in American pop culture. Chalamet's persuasive portrayal of a young Dylan's, when he was a nobody from nowhere's combination of diffidence and self-confidence, avoids all cliches and captures the moment. When Edward Norton's Seeger asks Dylan if he's shy, in a coy understatement, Dylan replies, "Not usually." Then he sings his very first composition "Song to Woody," which begins "Hey, hey Woody Guthrie, I wrote you a song ..." Eying each other, the two legends Seeger and Guthrie know they've found their heir.

But did they? That question's answer is the heart of the matter.

Using this musical approach, Chalamet and Barbaro shine while recreating Dylan and Baez's appearances at the Newport Folk Festival in 1963 and 1965 with "It

Ain't Me Babe" and "Don't Think Twice, It's Alright." Given their fraught relationship, the scenes shimmer with erotic and emotional undertones. As Tallerico says about Chalamet, which also rings true for Barbaro and the others, weaving the songs into the plot and playing them whole "somehow captures the newness of these moments ... it gives the film an electricity that biopics almost always lack." [3] This is particularly true, Tallerico points out, when Chalamet, Norton, and Barbaro perform classic songs whose lyrics many in the theater audience "know by heart." [4]

Although Mangold, to tighten the story and to make his theme clearer, takes some liberties with dates and other details (e.g., Sylvie Russo/Suze Rotolo and Johnny Cash were not in Newport in 1965), his decision to let the songs play out gives the film a texture of authenticity. And authenticity is the movie's driving theme.

In the end, it's what Bob Dylan is all about.

Dot #2. The Pleasures and Traps of Realistic Movies. Speaking of "authenticity," one of the pleasures of "realistic" movies is their recreation of a gone world, their ability to transport us to another time and place and to make that time and place seem so real that it doesn't matter that it isn't. As the Hollywood Reporter said, "A Complete Unknown's" "period recreation is impeccable." [5] Like the previous year's "Oppenheimer" or one that popped up in my YouTube feed while listening to Woody Guthrie sing his "So Long, It's Been Good to Know Yuh," Kenneth Branagh's "Henry V's" Battle of Agincourt, [6] all great realistic movies function as a time machine enabling us to experience another time and place.

It doesn't matter, for example, in the case of "A Complete Unknown" that you're not in Greenwich Village or Newport, Rhode Island in the early 1960s, but in Jersey City and Cape May, New Jersey in 2024. Recreating the era's precise visual details in the texture of Kodachrome snapshots right down to the green tile blocks of Guthrie's hospital (you can almost smell the disinfecting chlorine), the cars and cabs, the record store(s), and the old-time coffee percolator the young Dylan doesn't know how to use, the film not only looks like but also feels like that time just before the "metaphorical '60s" began.

Maybe Thomas Wolfe was wrong – you can go home again, if only for a moment and only in make believe. The problems begin when one loses track of what is real and what isn't. Which might be the central question for all Americans as the first quarter of the 21st century draws to a close. As enjoyable as realistic movies can be, we need to know when the lights come back on that we're in the "here and now" and not the "there and then." It's the old appearance versus reality question: "What's real, what isn't, and what does it matter if the story is somehow truer by diverging from the facts?"

In the end, what does it mean to be authentic?

Which when talking about Bob Zimmerman *aka* Bob Dylan *aka* Elston Gunn (a name Dylan used playing piano backing up an early teen throb Bobby Vee) *aka* Tedham Porterhouse (a name he used playing harmonica with Rambling Jack Elliot in 1964) *aka* Blind Boy Grunt *aka* Robert Milkwood Thomas *aka* Bob Wilbury as a member of the Traveling Wilburys is the question.

Dot #3. Who is Bob Dylan? While it is tempting to say that there are many, there is really only *one*. The many faces are really facets of *one*. And to that *one*, he has always been true even when spinning fantasies about the others. To that *one*, he always returns. It might be more to the point to say he never left that *one*. That *one* is the central self of whom the others are mere reflections.

Who is that *one*?

It is not, or not only, the “carny hustler” he claimed to be, which Monica Barbaro’s Joan Baez tells him is plainly BS.. I think her actual response to Timothee Chalamet’s Dylan telling her he learned how to play the guitar while working in a carnival is “You are so full of shit.” Dylan does not deny it but just keeps on strumming “Blowin’ in the Wind,” which he has just written. Dylan’s bluster notwithstanding, Baez, who is already famous, hops on the bed humming with him and trying to get him to let her record it. With the exception of Elle Fanning’s Sylvie Russo, modeled after Dylan’s first girlfriend Suze Rotolo, who loved him when he was still that nobody from nowhere no matter what he called himself, everyone else wants something from him.

Dylan is that most American of personas. He’s a hustler in both senses of the word. He will hustle, and he will work hard. He works hard at his art. His obsession with writing colors the entire movie as, while seemingly lost inside his own head, he scribbles in his notebooks. In a key Chelsea Hotel scene, Baez awakens to find her bed empty and Dylan sitting at the vanity writing. She asks if she is supposed to watch him write? He replies someone has to write the songs or what will they sing? When she kicks him out of the room, he has the presence of mind to pick up the hotel notepad and take it with him.

Dylan understands the key to success as described by John Irving’s Iowa Bob: Get obsessed and stay obsessed. [7]

In that obsession, he is also a hustler who will cut a corner, invent a persona, or create another reality to get where he is going. Getting there is the only thing that matters. The characters – and, in some sense, they are characters, not people – in his life discover they are only stops along the road. Memorably, Sylvie Russo says

it best when, while leaving him, says he really is like the carny actor spinning plates on a stick. Dylan says he kind of likes that guy. Sylvie tells him he is that guy, but she (and by implication, all others) are only the plates he spins.

Yet, in one of Dylan's many contradictions, he is very conventional at his core. Although the two main loves of his life were Sylvie Russo/Suze Rotolo and Joan Baez, most of his fans know but somehow discount that Dylan was married twice to two other women and has six children. Both of his marriages ended in divorce. Dylan himself said: "The marriages failed; the parents didn't." By which he meant he and his exes managed to meet their obligations to their children and successfully raise them.

Bob Dylan as "father" is not an image many people carry in their heads.

Dylan invented himself, but the core, the spine remains consistent. He really is the guy who allegedly said all he wanted to be was Buddy Holly. In "A Complete Unknown," there is an early scene in which Seeger wants to slot him as a folk singer. When Dylan mentions Holly and some others, he realizes Seeger does not know or value them. Seeger dismisses them as pop trivia.

Rather than argue, Dylan looks away, having discovered that Seeger isn't where he wants to go but might be of help getting where he wants to be.

The two constants in Dylan's life are the road, both literal and metaphorical, and his driven pursuit, his obsession, to find out where it leads and what it can teach him. Literally, it is Highway 61, which is an actual road that runs from the Ontario-Minnesota border through Duluth, Minnesota, to New Orleans, Louisiana. It begins near Dylan's hometown of Hibbing, Minnesota and literally runs through the heart of the heart of the country. And it's that country's heart and soul that Dylan pursues in his songs and art.

Highway 61 is also the title of the album containing what Rolling Stone magazine calls the greatest rock song of all time – "Like a Rolling Stone." [7] Both the song and the album title are metaphors for being "on the road." One of Dylan's unacknowledged spiritual fathers is Jack Kerouac, a "greatest generation" bad boy whose novel "On the Road" helped invent "The Sixties" – not the decade but the cultural phenomenon.

It is a road Dylan still travels as well into his 80s and performing over 200 concerts a year.

Why?

Well, those failed marriages might be a hint. Conventionality only works for a while and then you have to flee. It's the essential sub-theme of Dylan's entire life. He might live in Malibu or an estate in the Scottish Highlands, but it's not home.

For Dylan, "home" is the road. As he says in his "The Philosophy of Modern Song" discussing Willie Nelson's "On the Road Again," "When you're on the road, you're living the life you love ... making music with your friends and earning a living ... nobody's mad you didn't take out the garbage, acquaintances don't just drop in unannounced, neighbors don't give you the stink-eye every time the wind shifts ... the thing about being on the road is that you're not bogged down by anything. Not even bad news. You give pleasure to other people and you keep your grief to yourself." [8]

And no one is asking, "Am I supposed to sit and watch you write?"

Dylan is as American as you can get. He's Huck Finn; he's Daniel Boone sitting with some brothers over a campfire musing about where the creek may wind just over the hill and tells his bride, "I'll be back in a year or two, but I need to see where that creek (*aka* "the road") goes.

Which is the entire point of Mangold beginning and ending the film with Woody Guthrie's "So Long, It's Been Good to Know Yuh." When Dylan senses the need to move on, he goes. When he senses that this particular experience, whatever it might be and with whomever it might have happened, has given him all it has to give him, he sets out in search of the next. It is, as the poet William Carlos Williams could tell you, in the "American grain."

It is the spirit of America.

Always seeking the new, always seeking what's just around the bend, and when you find it, when serendipity strikes, following it and telling about it as truly as you can.

A recording studio scene in "A Complete Unknown" brings the metaphor brilliantly to life. Dylan and his new group are about to record "Like a Rolling Stone." Al Kooper wants to play bass, but Dylan has Mike Bloomfield from the Paul Butterfield Blues Band on bass. So, Kooper, determined to be part of the group, slips over to the organ, which he can't figure out how to turn on but does just in time to hit one of the most famous chords in all of rock – the opening of "Like a Rolling Stone." Dylan/Chalamet glances back and nods "Yes," and they roll with it because that's what you do on the road: you grab the serendipity and roll on!

"Roll on" where?

Next week, some more ***Dots***. What does it mean to be authentic? What did Gabe Cohn in the New York Times mean when speaking of Dylan that “sometimes there is nothing more entertaining than an entertaining con”? [9]

What did Dylan do a long, long time ago that made him one of the 20th century’s most important, to use a 21st century term, *cultural influencers*? And, gosh, he did it without TikTok!

Next week: Some last thoughts on Bob Dylan, “A Complete Unknown,” and the birth of rock music.



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“Bob Dylan in November 1963-3.jpg” at **Wikimedia Commons** available at [File:Bob Dylan in November 1963-3.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#) accessed Jan. 11, 2025.

“Bob Dylan with wife Sara Lownds, Woodstock, NY 1968 (Elliott Landry)” at **Facebook Group: It’s Not Dark Yet But it’s getting...** available at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1760101527844017/posts/1994292561091578/> accessed Jan. 11, 2025.

“DylanYoungKilkenny140719v2 (50 of 52)(52246124397)(cropped).jpg” at **Wikimedia Commons** available at [File:DylanYoungKilkenny140719v2 \(50 of 52\) \(52246124397\) \(cropped\).jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#) accessed Jan. 11, 2025.

End Notes

1. Harbon, Lucy, “How many songs has Bob Dylan written?” at **Far Out** (Nov. 18, 2024) available at [How many songs has Bob Dylan written in his life?](#) accessed Jan. 13, 2025.
2. Tallerico, Brian, “A Complete Unknown: Review” at **RogerEbert.com** available at [A Complete Unknown movie review \(2024\) | Roger Ebert](#) accessed Jan. 13, 2025.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.

5. Rooney, David, "A Complete Unknown' Review: An Electric Timothee Chalamet Hoists James Mangold's Bob Dylan Biopic Above Its Flaws," in **The Hollywood Reporter** available at ['A Complete Unknown' Review: Timothée Chalamet In Bob Dylan Bio-Drama](#) accessed Jan. 13, 2025.
6. You could do a serious time travel exercise just by "You Tubing" some afternoon by chronicling your clicking from thing to the next in a video string of consciousness exercise that would both bedazzle and inspire James Joyce.
7. Irving, John. **The Hotel New Hampshire**. (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1981).
8. "500 Greatest Songs of All Time (2004)," **Rolling Stone** available at <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/500-greatest-songs-of-all-time-151127/smokey-robinson-and-the-miracles-shop-around-71184/> accessed Sept. 21, 2021.
9. Dylan, Bob, **The Philosophy of Modern Song**. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2022), pp. 91-92.
10. Cohn, Gabe. "Who's Who in 'A Complete Unknown': A Guide to the Characters and Stars," **The New York Times** (Dec. 25, 2024) available at [Who's Who in the Bob Dylan Biopic, 'A Complete Unknown' - The New York Times](#) accessed Jan. 14, 2025.

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