

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes #195

January 2025

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



From left: Movie poster for “A Complete Unknown”; Bob Dylan, 1963; Bob Dylan, 2019; jacket cover for “The Philosophy of Modern Song.”

“Rolling on” from last week’s **Book Note #194’s** comments about James Mangold’s Bob Dylan biopic “A Complete Unknown,” here are some final questions about what it means to be authentic; what achievement of Dylan’s shifted the shape of America (and the world, too, for that matter); and what is an artist’s moral responsibility?

Once again, let’s see if we can connect some dots.

Dot #1. What does it mean to be “authentic”? A corollary question: Is it possible to be an authentic con? Last week, we ended with Gabe Cohn’s comment about Dylan that “sometimes there is nothing more entertaining than an entertaining con?” [1] P.T. Barnum said it first 150-plus years ago: “The common man, no matter how sharp and tough, actually enjoys having the wool pulled over his eyes, and makes it easier for the puller.” [2] Elsewhere, Barnum said something to the effect of “it is amazing the good nature with which Americans will accept a bit of humbug.”

So, the question arises, “Is Bob Dylan a ‘humbug’?” Has he been conning us? He has been called a chameleon, which I think is unfair. He has been described as an enigma – mysterious, puzzling, and difficult to understand. David Rooney in *The Hollywood Reporter* complimented Mangold and co-script writer Jay Cocks “for declining to try to solve the mystery of Bob Dylan.” [3]

Rooney is wrong. Mangold and Cocks did solve the mystery, but they didn’t have a character tell us the answer. Like true artists, they showed it.

What did they show?

They let us see that although Dylan has presented many faces to the world, they are all facets of one face. They are all facets of the one that is Bob Dylan.

Which is?

He’s an artist.

His art is lyric art. He is a singer of songs, but, most importantly, he is a songwriter.

In pursuit of his art, he has never wavered. He has, as noted last week, never been untrue to his quest. It is the quest, the journey – “the road,” if you will, to which Dylan has been ever faithful. If that faith has cost him personal pain, for the most part, he has kept it to himself. As he says in his quest, “You’re living the life you love ... you give pleasure to other people, and you keep your grief to yourself.” [4]

What is the life he loves? Writing and singing songs. If he did anything else, he would be inauthentic. He’d be a phony. And of all the things Bob Dylan is or isn’t (carny hustler, wannabe desperado, born-again Christian, rock ‘n’ roll singer, fill in the blank), he isn’t a phony.

He is as real as you can get. He is one of the few who does what he says he will do.

Which is what?

He always said he only wanted to be a pop singer. He never said he wanted to be the voice of a generation (although he became one); he never said he wanted to be a prophet (although he became one). All he ever wanted was to be a singer and a songwriter (and he became both).

That's as authentic as one can get.

Dylan said it best in "The Philosophy of Modern Song," discussing the art of (sit down, this might surprise you) Perry Como. In particular, he loves Como's rendition of "Without a Song." As Dylan notes, "Elvis Presley quotes the first verse of this song as being representative of everything he believes." [5]

from Without a Song

Without a song, the day would never end
Without a song, the road would never bend
When things go wrong, a man ain't got a friend
Without a song! [6]

Dylan goes on to say about Como what I am positive he would like people to say about him:

Perry is also the anti-American Idol. He is anti-flavor of the week, anti-hot List, and anti-bling. He was a Cadillac before the tailfins; a Colt .45, not a Glock; steak and potatoes, not California cuisine. Perry Como stands and delivers. No artifice, no forcing one syllable to spread itself thin across many notes. ... A man with lightning in his pocket doesn't ever brag. ... Perry Como lived every moment of every song he sang. ... When he stood and sang, he owned the song and he shared it, and we believed every single word. What more could you want from an artist? [7]

All the questions about Dylan's authenticity, all the accusations of inauthenticity result from a decision Bob Zimmerman made when transforming himself into Bob Dylan at the very beginning of his career. And, in this context, career is an important word. Among the many facets of his persona, Dylan is a careerist. He always wanted to be a pop singer. At the outset, his two great influences were Buddy Holly, whose songs he once sang in a high school musical, and Woody Guthrie, whose songs he internalized from the cold winds of his upper-midwestern youth. You can't get much farther north – upper Midwest – than Hibbing, Minnesota.

As the late 1950s turned into the 1960s, early rock 'n' roll was starting to get stale; the pulsing energy of Elvis, Chuck Berry, and Jerry Lee Lewis et al, was running low. Most people today have forgotten, but there was a folk music revival, and it was gaining energy by going back to its roots – in Black southern blues, English ballads, Woody Guthrie's songs of the Dust Bowl^[8] Hank Williams transforming bluegrass into the music of the coal miner and the rural and urban poor, and the music of the 19th and early 20th century labor movement (think Paul Robeson, Joan Baez, or Phil Ochs singing "The Ballad of Joe Hill.") The music of the Civil Rights Movement (think Odetta and the young Sam Cooke) combined with the nascent culture of protest (Students

for a Democratic Society was formed in 1960) created a new kind of socially conscious folk music. All it lacked was its own troubadour or two singing their songs rooted in the spirit of the times.

First inspired by Suze Rotolo, who was played as Sylvie Russo by Elle Fanning in “A Complete Unknown,” Dylan’s careerist instincts merged with his latent social awareness and blossomed into a catalog of some of the most famous songs in American cultural history. “Masters of War,” “With God On Our Side,” “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall,” “Blowin’ in the Wind,” “It’s All Right, Don’t Think Twice,” “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue,” “The Times They Are A-Changin’,” and a half dozen or so more. Almost before he knew it, Bob Zimmerman as Bob Dylan became a cultural icon of political protest and social awareness.

But that’s not what he wanted to be. In a sense, he got trapped in a persona he created; but trapped, he would not remain. As he told Nat Hentoff in a famous 1964 interview, he was done writing “finger-pointing songs.” Other people were doing it now and it was time for him to move on. [8]

Moving on, “rolling on,” he escaped the trap. Escaping that trap, he reinvented rock ’n’ roll and folk music as a new hybrid: folk rock. Folk rock, again led by Dylan and a quickly gathering covey of followers, found its fullest expression simply as “rock.”

There is not enough space in a simple **Book Note** to trace the entire trajectory, but “A Complete Unknown” focuses on the seminal moment. Which is an apt metaphor. “A Complete Unknown” is a “guy” film and in many ways Dylan is a “guy’s guy.” In addition to its many positive characteristics (friendship and loyalty – you could say that Dylan planted the seeds that bloomed into country music’s 21st century “bro” style), the film also shows “a ‘guy’s-guys’ world’s underside” in how Dylan treated the women in his life.

It is his worst trait.

He is their “bad boy” whom none have apparently been able to redeem, because, to borrow, ironically, the title of one of his great civil rights songs “Only a Pawn in Their Game,” they are pawns in his game. Only Sylvie Russo/Suze Rotolo had the strength to just walk away and escape the vitriol he unleashes about women and divorce lawyers in his essay on Johnnie Taylor’s 1973 recording “Cheaper to Keep Her.” [9]

What was the seminal moment?

Dot #2. Dylan Goes Electric. It was 1965’s Newport Folk Festival when Dylan went electric and invented a new “rock” music.

For Dylan and, as it turned out, for almost everyone else, it was the end of the folk road. Oh, some kept at it singing the old tunes, but they were becoming aural antiquarians like Civil War buffs collecting belt buckles and missing the entire point of the thing. Dylan opened a new road

when he sang that he wasn't going to work on Maggie's Farm "no more." It was the night rock 'n' roll grew up, put on its big-boy pants, and became "rock."

Not everyone got it and not everyone was happy. Among those who neither got it nor liked it were Pete Seeger and folk music guru Alan Lomax. What they sensed that night was the world passing them by.

So, Bob Dylan transformed rock 'n' roll; how?

Now all you Elvis and doo-wop fans, don't throw things, but pre-Dylan, rock 'n' roll was largely "sugar pops and lollipops." It was the Chordettes singing "Mr. Sandman" and "Lollipop," Elvis's swinging hips and male bravado ("Jail House Rock" and covering Carl Perkins' "Blue Suede Shoes"), Bobby Darin "splishing and splashing," Dion pretending to be a wanderer (which is to say serial womanizer), Brenda Lee coming out of rockabilly and giving it some juice ("All Alone Am I" and "I'm Sorry") and the earliest California sound like Jan and Dean's 1959 "Baby Talk" and 1963's "Drag City." Yes, Chuck Berry and other Black artists, like Fats Domino, extending from their blues roots had some depth, but even they were mostly singing about some version of teen love and hot rod cars.

Yes, rock 'n' roll's blues roots had depth but by the late -1950s, rock 'n' roll music was all or mostly "bubblegum" music. It just occurred to me that some readers might not know what "bubblegum" music was or meant. It's simple. It's the "snap and pop" musical version of empty calories.

There were some exceptions. Country crossover artists, like Roy Orbison, Conway Twitty, Patsy Cline, and Black artists, like Sam Cooke and Aretha Franklin gave it heft, but all the serious work was being done in jazz (think Miles Davis et al.). Danny and the Juniors singing 1958's "Rock and Roll Is Here to Stay" notwithstanding, by the early 1960s, rock 'n' roll was running out of juice. Although, as a caveat, you could say that Phil Spector's wall of sound girl groups – The Ronettes ("Be My Baby") and The Crystals ("He's a Rebel") – pointed in a new direction.

Dylan melded his socially aware folk consciousness with rock 'n' roll's electric energy and, to quote Kurt Vonnegut, "hey presto," he birthed a new genre swamping them both.

Dylan transformed rock into an art form, although not everyone got either the beat or the message. Somewhere, illustrating his cultural tone-deafness, Washington Post columnist George Will said it was all a lot of bad music and pretentious lyrics. Some of it (much of it?) was. Regardless, the "rock" Dylan created over the next 50 years transformed American culture by delivering popular music that tackled serious themes. He spawned a generation of successors, who without his lead, it is not possible to imagine succeeding. To name only a few: Crosby, Stills, and Nash, Neil Young, The Grateful Dead, Kris Kristofferson, Bob Seeger, the Motown of the late-1960s (The Temptations' "Ball of Confusion" and Edwin Starr's "War"), Tom Petty, Jackson Browne, Madonna, Bruce Springsteen, Elvis Costello, Lady Gaga, and The Eagles of "Witchy Woman."

Then, as the 20th century ended, rock began to run out of gas to be replaced by rap, hip hop, and country pop in its many forms. Younger readers will have to fill in the chronology.

But in Newport in 1965, Bob Dylan brought it to life. For better or worse (*pace* George Will), Dylan made rock 'n' roll serious and here we are living in a "Spotify" playlist world unimaginable when he first rolled into lower Manhattan on January 24th, 1961.

Dot #3: What Are an Artist's Moral Responsibilities? The answer to that question brings us back to ***Dot #1: What does it mean to be authentic?*** Dylan's great achievement is that he created an entire musical genre. Not many can say that, which, by the way, he never does. Remember the comment he made about Perry Como? He said, "A man with lightning in his pocket doesn't ever brag."

Dylan matters because not only did he shift the shape of American culture but also because he is a consummate poet. In a Dylan song, the melody, the music is important. He works hard at his musical craft, but it's the lyrics that carry the tune and not the reverse.

He is a poet. We explored that in ***Book Note #74*** reprised two weeks ago as a ***Book Note*** "Classic" to begin this three-piece set on the Bob Dylan portrayed in James Mangold's "A Complete Unknown," which James Parker said was "a parable of artistic ruthlessness." [10]

Which means what?

Well, I think what Parker means is what I've been saying: Dylan's only loyalty is to his art. Everything else takes second place, which is true of all great artists. They're not all jerks, but many are. And it doesn't matter. To note only the obvious ones: think of Mozart in "Amadeus": an obnoxious twit but gifted with musical grace; or, think of Beethoven in "Immortal Beloved," a driven, obsessive — one might even say an egomaniac — gifted to hear and bring to life sounds only he heard until he wrote them down for others to play; or, Picasso, whose treatment of the women in his life makes Dylan look like some post-feminist enlightened male. They all might have been better people — it certainly would have made life for those around them easier — but the world would be a poorer place.

To ask whether their behavior is ethical, whether it is "morally" responsible, is to miss the point. Their responsibility is to their gift. Not to you or to me or to anyone else with whom they get entangled. If it's too much to bear, then do what Suze Rotolo did — leave with your dignity intact.

Aside: Because this **Book Note** was getting longer than I wanted, I almost put this Aside in an **End Note**, but Suze Rotolo doesn't deserve to be put in an **End Note**. She was Dylan's first girlfriend in New York. She lit the fuse of his social consciousness. She is the girl with Dylan walking down Fourth Street in the iconic photograph on the cover of the album that made him famous, "The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan." Apparently, the only request Dylan made of James Mangold in the making of "A Complete Unknown" was to not use Rotolo's real name. Mangold christened her "Sylvie Russo." I am not sure if it's an inauthentic note or Dylan trying to finesse a chapter of his life. Or, since Rotolo, who was a private person and not a public figure, died in 2011 and can't speak for herself, it is Dylan expressing his respect for her and in some sense trying to protect her. For the man who never expresses his grief, I think it is a hint that he knows now that she was the only one who loved him, even if he was only ever going to be Bob Zimmerman. Or, maybe, I'm giving the enigmatic Dylan the benefit of a doubt he doesn't deserve.



Regardless, if you hang around to get what you can get, like Joan Baez and some others, then don't whine.

Mangold knows that Dylan is always growing, always creating. It is who he is; it is what he must do. He can, he could, do no other. Which is why Mangold brilliantly opens and closes "A Complete Unknown" with Woody Guthrie's "So Long, It's Been Good to Know Yuh," sometimes captioned "Dusty Old Dust."

Guthrie's song is about the experience of those whose lives were devastated by the dust storms of the 1930s Dust Bowl. In it, Guthrie captures the resilience of a people who refuse to die. The song's refrain is:

from So Long, It's Been Good to Know Yuh

So long, been good to know yuh
 So long, it's been good to know yuh
 So long, it's been good to know yuh
 This dusty old dust is a-gettin' my home
 And I've got to be driftin' along [11]

Whether it's "sweethearts sparkin' in the dark," a preacher thinking it might be the end times and taking up a last collection before he hits the road, or an Everyman whose farm has been "dusted under," it's not time to die or give up. It's time to hit the road to a better future, like the

Joad family in John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath," even if that future is desperately uncertain.

Similarly, Mangold perfectly captures Dylan's refusal to be typecast and his refusal to quit. When one thing is done (dusty), he drops it (be it song, town, home, friend, or woman), and hits the road writing and singing his songs.

It's what he does; it's in his nature. To do anything else would be inauthentic.



You can find Woody Guthrie singing "So Long, It's Been Good to Know Yuh" here ['So Long, It's Been Good to Know Yuh' - Woody Guthrie - YouTube](#)



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End Notes

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