



BOB DYLAN'S AMERICA

**It's a land of Walt Whitman
and Chuck Berry, of border towns
and murder ballads – and America's
greatest songwriter may be the
last man living there**

BY DOUGLAS BRINKLEY

PHOTOGRAPH BY SAM JONES



ON APRIL 7TH, FRENCH PRESIDENT Nicolas Sarkozy and his wife, Carla Bruni-Sarkozy, stroll into the Palais des Congrès in Paris. Nobody in the sold-out auditorium, however, pays the First Couple much attention. Bob Dylan, who in 1990 was named a *Commandeur dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*, the highest cultural award France can bestow, is about to take the stage for an evening of *nostalgie* (as the tickets read). After an old-style-vaudevillian introduction, out walks Dylan with his five-member band, all sharply dressed in Pretty Boy Floyd suits and fedoras. As Dylan launches into a hard-rock version of "Cat's in the Well," from his *Under the Red Sky* album, the cheering crowd holds up cellphones, trying to film the enigmatic legend, who immediately ensconces himself behind an electric piano. Dylan plays guitar on only a single song – as is usually the case – but throughout the night his harmonica riffs soar through the cavernous hall. Everyone feels energized by his charismatic presence. After about two and a half hours, he ends the performance with a defiant version of the crowd-pleasing "Blowin' in the Wind."

After the show, the Sarkozys wander backstage, anxious to meet Dylan. The French president is attired in a black turtleneck and jeans. In a single swooping motion, Sarkozy seizes Dylan's hand, welcoming him to France. "It was like looking at my mirror image," Dylan tells me later, about the encounter. "I can see why he's the head of France. He's genuine and warm and extremely likable. I asked Sarkozy, 'Do you think the whole global thing is over?' I knew they just had a big G-20 meeting and they maybe were discussing that. I didn't think he'd tell me, but I asked him anyway."

While Dylan – who will be playing around 30 concerts in minor-league baseball stadiums this summer along with Willie Nelson and John Mellencamp – is celebrated in America, he is lionized in Europe. The French periodicals were all abuzz that Dylan had just collaborated with the popular 41-year-old film director Olivier Dahan on a new movie soundtrack. The following evening, at Dylan's second sold-out Paris show, I chatted with the genial Dahan, a scruffy-looking guy straight from the pages of *Olivier Twist*. In 2007, Dahan directed *La Vie en Rose*, the celebrated biopic of Edith Piaf that won two Academy Awards. Last year, he brazenly solicited a handful of songs from Dylan, via a letter, for his new road movie, *My Own Love Song*. Starring Forest Whitaker and Renée Zellweger, *My Own Love Song* is the tale of an infirm female singer who journeys across America, from Kansas to Louisiana. "I wanted the songs to feel Southern," Dahan says. "Real songs of the American spirit. What that meant for me, like millions of others worldwide, is Bob Dylan's songs."

"At first this was unthinkable," Dylan recounts. "I mean, I didn't know what [Dahan] was actually saying. [*In faux French accent*] 'Could you write uh, 10, 12 songs?' Ya know? I said, 'Yeah, really? Is this guy serious?' But he was so audacious! Usually you get asked to do, like, one song, and it's at the end of the movie. But 10 songs?" Dylan continues, "Dahan wanted to put these songs throughout the movie and find different reasons for them. I just kind of gave the guy the benefit of the doubt that he knew what he was doing."

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I always liked those movies, ya know, those black-and-white movies where, like, Veronica Lake all of a sudden out of nowhere is singing in a nightclub. Or Diahann Carroll is singing in a cafe. All those movies where the action stops and the heroes are represented as walking past a barn dance where the Sons of the Pioneers are playing on a truck. It's so musical. They don't put that kind of thing in movies anymore. Now it's come down to just an end-title song – which has nothing to do with the movie, and basically people are walking out."

The audiences at the Palais des Congrès were cross-generational: The gray-hairs and the body-pierced youths sat side by side. At this juncture Dylan's audience is . . . well, everybody. The French troubadour Charles Aznavour attended that second Paris show with one of his sons. Dylan, in homage to Aznavour, played the Frenchman's melancholic composition "The Times We Have Known" with sublime grace. After the show, the 84-year-old Aznavour joined Dylan backstage for a bit of banter. Wearing a suede coat with a sky-blue scarf around his neck, the deeply tanned Aznavour epitomized to Dylan how a popular musician can

comport himself with dignity in the fourth quarter of life. "I finally caught up with you," Dylan tells him. "I saw you in 1963 at Carnegie Hall. It was filled with French people and me. I was the only American there, really."

After a round of Obama fist bumps, Dylan heads down a flight of stairs and onto his touring bus for the five-hour drive to Amsterdam, where he will be playing three more shows. For Dylan, it seems, life is always the next gig. Changing pace and location are essential to his survival as an artist. Contrary to reputation, however, he is no recluse. People populate his waking hours (although they're primarily of the worker-bee kind). "You're always aware of what town you're in," Dylan says of the millions of miles logged. "But in another sense, touring is like being on a freighter out on the open sea. You're really out there for days and months."

Critics have claimed that since 1988 Dylan has been on a Never Ending Tour, playing more than 100 concerts a year. The aggrieved Dylan bristles at the term. "Critics should know that there's no such thing as forever," he says. "So that speaks more about them who would use that phrase as if there's some important meaning in it. You never heard about Oral Roberts and Billy Graham being on some Never Ending Preacher Tour. Does anybody ever call Henry Ford a Never Ending Car Builder? Is Rupert Murdoch a Never Ending Media Tycoon? What about Donald Trump? Does anybody say he has a Never Ending Quest to build buildings? Picasso painted well into his 90s. And Paul Newman raced cars in his 70s. Anybody ever say that Duke Ellington was on a Never Ending Bandstand Tour? But critics apply a different standard to me for some reason. But we're living in an age of breaking everything down into simplistic terms, aren't we? These days, people are lucky to have a job. Any job. So critics might be uncomfortable with me [working so much]. Maybe they can't figure it out. But nobody in my particular audience feels that way about what I do. Anybody with a trade can work as long as they want. A welder, a carpenter, an electrician. They don't necessarily need to retire. People who have jobs on an assembly line, or are doing some kind of drudgery work, they might be thinking of retiring every day. Every man should learn a trade. It's different

than a job. My music wasn't made to take me from one place to another so I can retire early."

Dylan has spent a lifetime dodging people's attempts to define him. He scorns "newsy people" who constantly try to pin him down about his personal life. Random strangers sometimes come up to him asking for a critique of Martin Scorsese's *No Direction Home* documentary about his life. "I've never seen it," he tells me. "Well, a lot of that footage was gathered up from the Sixties. So I'd seen that, and I thought that was like looking at a different character. But it certainly was powerful. And I don't, or can't, do that anymore."

Dylan's principal frustration, however, is that he feels misunderstood as an artist: "Popular music has no, whatever you call them, critics, that understand popular music in all of its dynamic fundamentalism. The consensus on me is that I'm a songwriter. And that I was influenced by Woody Guthrie and sang protest songs. Then rock & roll songs. Then religious songs for a period of time. But it's a stereotype. A media creation. Which is impossible to avoid if you're any type of public figure at all." Where critics think he's deconstructing old songs, he instead sees himself as an old-time musical arranger. "My band plays a different type of music than anybody else plays," Dylan says. "We play distinctive rhythms that no other band can play. There are so many of my songs that have been rearranged at this point that I've lost track of them myself. We do keep the structures intact to some degree. But the dynamics of the song itself might change from one given night to another because the mathematical process we use allows that. As far as I know, no one else out there plays like this. Today, yesterday and probably tomorrow. I don't think you'll hear what I do ever again. It took a while to find this thing. But then again, I believe that things are handed to you when you're ready to make use of them. You wouldn't recognize them unless you'd come through certain experiences. I'm a strong believer that each man has a destiny."

These days, Dylan has largely decommissioned the electric guitar in favor of an electric keyboard. Does he have arthritis? Or was he sick of jamming on "Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat" for the thousandth time? The answer is neither. "I was looking for a keyboard player to play triplet forms for a long period of time," he explains. "I tried different musicians for it, and we couldn't find anybody who understood the style of what we were doing and to stay within the boundaries. And, finally, you've just got to do it on your own. As far as guitar, I was looking for a guitar player who could play exactly like me, only better. I can't find that person either. The same thing applies to keyboards. I'm looking for a piano player who can play just like me, only better. If I could find him or her, I would hire that person. So far it hasn't happened. I wish it would. We could do more if I was freed up there."

I ask whether, as bandleader, Dylan had ever played a set with the perfect guitarist. Dylan jumps at the opportunity to answer rather reminiscently. "The guy that I always miss, and I think he'd still be around if he stayed with me, actually, was Mike Bloomfield," Dylan says of his collaborator on *Highway 61 Revisited* (who also famously played electric guitar with him at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965). "He could just flat-out play. He had so much soul. And he knew all the styles, and he could play them so incredibly well. He was an expert player and a real prodigy, too. Started playing early. But then

again a lot of good guitarists have played with me. Freddy Tackett, Steve Ripley - Mick Taylor played with me for a minute."

Full of memory lane, Dylan goes on to tell a story about first meeting Bloomfield in Chicago at a headhunt on the South Side. A social misfit, Bloomfield was the rare white guitarist who had recorded with the likes of Sleepy John Estes and Big Joe Williams. "He could play like Willie Brown or Charlie Patton," Dylan says. "He could play like Robert Johnson way back then in the Sixties. The only other guy who could do that in those days was Brian Jones, who played in the Rolling Stones. He could also do the same thing. Fingerpicking rhythms that hardly anyone could do. Those are the only two guys I've ever met who could . . . from back then . . . the only two guys who could play the pure style of country blues authentically."

DYLAN, WHO IS ABOUT TO TURN 68, CONTINUES to be a force of nature, a veritable one-man Johnstown Flood. It's impossible to categorize or comprehend his confounding output of new songs. His youthful rebelliousness has now matured into an old-style American individualism. As a composer, Dylan now fits comfortably alongside George Gershwin or Irving Berlin, though he grumpily refuses to wear any man's collar. Casually dressed in jeans and a sweater vest, Dylan offers me coffee for our interview in a second-floor suite at Amsterdam's Intercontinental Hotel along the Amstel River. Dylan's curly hair is still tousled, his deeply creased face full of mischief. He has a razor-sharp memory. For two evenings, he proves to be a lucid, if circumspect, conversationalist.

Like the dour-faced farmer in Grant Wood's "American Gothic," Dylan seems to have the American Songbook in one hand and a raised pitchfork in the other, aimed at rock critics, politicians, Wall Street financiers, back-alley thieves, the World Wide Web - anything that cheapens the spirit of the individual. His nostalgia is more for the Chess Records Fifties than the psychedelic Sixties. He believes that Europe should lose the euro and go back to its old currencies ("I miss the pictures on the old money," he says). If Dylan had his way, there'd be Sousa bands on Main Street and vinyl albums instead of CDs. Teenagers would go on nature hikes instead of watching YouTube. "It's peculiar and unnerving in a way to see so many young people walking around with cellphones and iPods in their ears and so wrapped up in media and video games," he says. "It robs them of their self-identity. It's a shame to see them so tuned out to real life. Of course they are free to do that, as if that's got anything to do with freedom. The cost of liberty is high, and young people should understand that before they start spending their life with all those gadgets."

Ever since 2001's *Love and Theft*, Dylan has been producing his own albums under the pseudonym Jack Frost. "It's better that I produce," he says. "It saves a lot of time. A lot of rigmarole. A lot of communication, ya know? It's just easier for me to make records. Translating my own ideas directly rather than having them go through somebody else. I know my form of music better than anyone else would."

"My band plays a different type of music than anybody else. I don't think you'll hear what I do ever again. It took a while to find this thing. But then again, I believe that things are handed to you when you are ready to make use of them."

Right now, Dylan is focused on *Together Through Life*, the new studio album he recorded last fall. The album's genesis was the song "Life Is Hard," his first gift to Dahan. With a pocket full of lyrics and melodies, Dylan booked a studio to lay down nine other new tracks. To help capture the Texas-Mexico-escapism aura, Dylan hired Grateful Dead lyricist Robert Hunter to work with him. The 68-year-old Hunter had previously written two songs with Dylan, for *Down in the Groove* in 1988: "Silvio" and "Ugliest Girl in the World." It's rare, but not unprecedented, for Dylan to collaborate on songs. Over the years, he's shared songwriting credits with the likes of Tom Petty, Willie Nelson, the late Rick Danko of the Band – even Michael Bolton. (When he was in the Traveling Wilburys, Dylan wrote numerous songs with George Harrison. He hopes one day to sit down and work with Paul McCartney: "That'd be exciting to do something with Paul! But, ya know, your paths have to cross for something like that to make sense.")

Dylan and Hunter view the world through a similar lens. "Hunter is an old buddy," Dylan says. "We could probably write a hundred songs together if we thought it was important or the right reasons were there. He's got a way with words, and I do too. We both write a different type of song than what passes today for songwriting. I think we'll be writing a couple of other songs too, for some off-Broadway play." For guitar, Dylan brought in Mike Campbell (on loan from Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers). "Mike and I played before lots of times when I was on tour with Tom," Dylan says. "There was always some part of the show where Mike and myself and [organist] Benmont Tench would play two or three ballads. On my new record I didn't think he'd have any problem."

On *Together Through Life*, Dylan's mystic-drifter persona of his recent records has moved from the Mississippi Delta to Houston and the U.S.-Mexico borderland. Brownsville. McAllen. Laredo. El Paso. "You feel things, and you're not quite sure what you feel," Dylan says about the region. "But it follows your every move, and you don't know why. You can't get out of it. It's the pressure that's imposed on us." The album bottles the feeling of King Ranch country along Highway 77 – down toward San Benito, where the water tower reads HOMETOWN OF FREDDY FENDER. "Spirited guys from down there," Dylan believes. "Independent-thinking guys. Texas might have more independent-thinking people than any other state in the country. And it shows in the music. Realistically speaking, that is the same type of music that I heard growing up most nights in Minnesota. The languages were just different. It was sung in Spanish there. But where I came from, it was sung in Polish."

The first track of *Together Through Life* – "Beyond Here Lies Nothin'" – is pure Tex-Mex torque. Already getting a lot of radio play, the song conjures up shiny automobiles rumbling across "boulevards of broken cars" through the vast Rio Grande Valley night. No grapefruit trees or warm salt breezes or beef-jerky stands here. You imagine forlorn bank buildings and tiny grain elevators and faded billboard advertisements. The last-chance gas is behind you a good 20 miles. By the second track, "Life Is Hard," Dylan is wandering past the old schoolyard, looking for strength to fight back the grim tide of old age. A red-brick afterglow lin-

gers in the ballad like in an Edward Hopper painting. A Broadway singer has already recorded a demo of the song; it would be perfect for Diane Reeves or Norah Jones.

The third track, "My Wife's Home Town," a gloss on the old blues standard "I Just Want to Make Love to You," echoes the haunting Tom Waits vibe of *Mule Variations*. Dylan sounds like a phlegmatic Cab Calloway scattling and coughing before the coffin closes. Everything feels condemned. The fiendish specter of suicide is omnipresent: "State gone broke/The county's dry/Don't be looking at me with that evil eye." Dylan even menacingly cackles "a-hah-heh-heh" on the track. "The song is a tribute, not a death chant," he says. "Deep down, I think that everybody thinks like me sooner or later. They just might not be able to express it."

The sense of dislocation continues in the more upbeat "If You Ever Go to Houston." The long-shot chance of redemption (or at least a good night of fun) is palatable. Dylan and Hunter are tapping into the rootlessness of Houston, which is about to supplant Chicago as the third-largest city in the United States. There is a feeling of operating on the undetected margins of the sprawl. The Dylan-Hunter lyric noticeably references the Mexican-American War of 1846 to 1848 as a remembrance of survival against adversity.

I ask Dylan about the wave of recent violence reaching up from Mexico into the Southwest borderlands, an area that the Grateful Dead

had once happily celebrated in "Mexicali Blues" and other songs. "That's always been dangerous ground," he says. "It has a different kind of population than Austin or Dallas or other big cities. Texas is so big. It's a republic; it's its own country. The Texas borderlands are like a buffer zone for Mexico and the rest of the States. You get that leftover vibe from northern Mexico, central Mexico, where you have that legacy of Aztec brutality. That's where they used to slash the hearts out of people, captives and thousands of slaves offered up on bloody altars. On the other hand, you have Cortés and all those conquistadors who were coming out of the Spanish Inquisition-type scene. So I can imagine it got pretty brutal. And I think it's got a lot of spillover from that time, in our times. I see the violence as some kind of epidemic that has lasted until this day maybe."

Not that Dylan isn't having fun in *Together Through Life*. In "I Feel a Change Comin' On," the wayward stranger gets a little oomph in his stride. Surveying the crazy world, Dylan is hopeful that a new love will fall into his arms. Dreams come and go, Dylan sings, but love is eternal. Every good Dylan album has a first-person line, one that his fans gravitate toward with wild enthusiasm. The winner in *Together Through Life* is the quip "I'm listening to Billy Joe Shaver/And I'm reading James Joyce/Some people they tell me/I've got the blood of the land in my voice." Dylanologists will probably have a field day analyzing why he chose to call out Shaver (a hand-maimed Texas guitar-picker who wrote many of Waylon Jennings' best songs). And why James Joyce? "Waylon played me [Shaver's] 'Ain't No God in Mexico,' and I don't know, it was quite good," Dylan says. "Shaver and David Allen Coe became my favorite guys in that [outlaw] genre. The verse came out of nowhere. No... you know something? Subliminally, I can't say that this is actually true. But I think it was more of a Celtic thing. Tying

"That town where I grew up hasn't changed that much": Hibbing, Minnesota, in 1941.



Billy Joe with James Joyce. I think subliminally or astrologically those two names just wanted to be combined. Those two personalities." (Maybe it's just that "Joyce" rhymes with "voice"?)

Something about the Old West mythology of gunslinger John Wesley Hardin, political maverick Sam Houston and short-story writer O. Henry appeals to Dylan's imagination. Like a Western hero, he has given up the sedentary life and chosen the difficult path of his own ideals, made real by noble isolation. "I think you really have to be a Texan to appreciate the vastness of it and the emptiness of it," Dylan says. "But I'm an honorary Texan."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Well," he says, "George Bush, when he was governor, gave me a proclamation that says I'm an honorary Texan [*holds hand up in pledge, laughs*]. As if anybody needed proof. It's no small thing. I take it as a high honor."

While Dylan has praised Obama and rhapsodized about Obama's memoir, *Dreams From My Father*, he's been uncritical of the Bush administration. Almost every American artist has taken a piñata swipe at Bush's legacy, but Dylan refuses. He instead looks at the Bush years as just another unsurprising incident of dawn-of-man folly. "I read history books just like you do," Dylan says. "None of those guys are immune to the laws of history. They're going to go up or down, and they're going to take their people with them. None of us really knew what was happening in the economy. It changed so quickly into a true nightmare of horror. In another day and age, heads would roll. That's what would happen.

The rot would be cut out. As far as blaming everything on the last president, think of it this way: The same folks who had held him in such high regard came to despise him. Isn't it funny that they're the very same people who once loved him? People are fickle. Their loyalty can turn at the drop of a hat."

At heart Dylan is an old-fashioned moralist like Shane, who believes in the basic lessons taught by *McGuffey's Readers* and the power of a six-shooter. A cowboy-movie aficionado, Dylan considers director John Ford a great American artist. "I like his old films," Dylan says. "He was a man's man, and he thought that way. He never had his guard down. Put courage and bravery, redemption and a peculiar mix of agony and ecstasy on the screen in a brilliant dramatic manner. His movies were easy to understand. I like that period of time in American films. I think America has produced the greatest films ever. No other country has ever come close. The great movies that came out of America in the studio system, which a lot of people say is the slavery system, were heroic and visionary, and inspired people in a way that no other country has ever done. If film is the ultimate art form, then you'll need to look no further than those films. Art has the ability to transform people's lives, and they did just that."

The word "caustic" takes on a whole new meaning in *Together Through Life's* final cut, the sure-to-be-canonical "It's All Good." Dylan belittles all those arrogant narcissists who constantly say it's all good, even when the world crumbles around them. Drums and guitar rumble in a mad-attic rush of grunge blues while Dylan spits out sarcasm with such lines as "Big politicians telling lies/Restaurant kitchen all full of flies/Don't make a bit of difference/Don't see why it should . . . it's all good." It's a raucous affair. I ask Dylan if he has ever uttered the slang expression "It's all

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good," even once, himself. "I might have, who knows?" he says with a sidelong, savvy smile. "Maybe if I was joking or something, just like in the song."

If there is a guiding spirit to *Together Through Life* - Dylan's 33rd studio album - it's the ghost of Doug Sahm. At age 11, Sahm, a San Antonio native, had already recorded his first song, "A Real American Joe." By the time he was 13, the Grand Ole Opry offered him a regular gig; his mother disapproved. Eventually, Sahm's band - the Sir Douglas Quintet - became the Lone Star answer to the Beatles. The cosmic-cowboy sound was born. An impressed Dylan volunteered to sing harmony and play guitar on Sahm's 1973 *Doug Sahm and Band* as a sign of outsider solidarity; the album remains a weird, loose-grooving and quirky rock & roll classic. Dylan even wrote the lighthearted song "Wallflower" for it. Bootleg tapes of the Sahm-Dylan sessions now float around the black market. Tejano accordionist Flaco Jiménez anchored that band, Doug Sahm and Friends, back in 1973, just as David Hidalgo is doing with *Together Through Life*. As late as 1995, Sahm had joined Dylan onstage, in Austin, to play electric guitar on six numbers, including a version of the Grateful Dead's "Alabama Getaway." Sahm told the Texas audience that Dylan was a "beautiful friend" whom he loved dearly.

"Doug was like me, maybe the only figure from that old period of time that I connected with," Dylan explains. "His was a big soul. He had a hit record, 'She's About a Mover,' and I had a hit record ['Like a Rolling Stone'] at the same time. So we be-

came buddies back then, and we played the same kind of music. We never really broke apart. We always hooked up at certain intervals in our lives . . . here and there from time to time. Like Bloomfield, Doug was once a child prodigy too. He was playing fiddle, steel guitar and maybe even saxophone before he was in his teens. I'd never met anybody that had played onstage with Hank Williams before, let alone someone my own age. Doug had a heavy frequency, and it was in his nerves. It's like what Charlie Patton says, 'My God, what solid power.' I miss Doug. He got caught in the grind. He should still be here."

In the pecking order of rock & roll survivors, Dylan sees himself as number two, behind only Chuck Berry. Two songs from the new album - "Jolene" and "Shake Shake Mama" - sound like cuts from Berry's *After School Session*. (Another new Dylan song is "Forgetful Heart," which lyrically touches upon Berry's "Drifting Heart" of that 1958 album.) A friendship has developed between Dylan and Berry over the years. "Chuck said to me, 'By God, I hope you live to be 100, and I hope I live forever,'" Dylan says with a laugh. "He said that to me a couple of years ago. In my universe, Chuck is irreplaceable. . . . All that brilliance is still there, and he's still a force of nature. As long as Chuck Berry's around, everything's as it should be. This is a man who has been through it all. The world treated him so nasty. But in the end, it was the world that got beat."

When I ask Dylan if he'd ever thought of collaborating on a project with Berry, he laughs. "Chuck Berry?" he says. "The thought is preposterous. Chuck doesn't need anybody to do anything with or for him. You got to say that at this point in history he's probably the man. His presence is everywhere, but you never know it. I love Little Richard, but I don't think he performs as much as Chuck. And he's certainly not as spontaneous as Chuck.

Chuck can perform at the drop of a hat. Well, Little Richard, he can too, actually, but he doesn't."

After a little more talk on Berry, I shift gears to Elvis Presley, who inspired Dylan as a young man. Dylan has quipped that when he first encountered Elvis' voice as a teenager, it was like "busting out of jail." For Dylan, the very fact that Elvis had recorded versions of "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right," "Tomorrow Is a Long Time" and "Blowin' in the Wind" remains mind-boggling. Dutifully, as if returning a favor, Dylan recorded Elvis' hit "(Now and Then There's) A Fool Such As I" during both the *Basement Tapes* and *Self-Portrait* sessions.

But that was about as close as they ever got. "I never met Elvis," Dylan says. "I never met Elvis, because I didn't want to meet Elvis. Elvis was in his Sixties movie period, and he was just cranking 'em out and knockin' 'em off, one after another. And Elvis had kind of fallen out of favor in the Sixties. He didn't really come back until, whatever was it, '68? I know the Beatles went to see him, and he just played with their heads. 'Cause George [Harrison] told me about the scene. And Derek [Taylor], one of the guys who used to work for him. Elvis was truly some sort of American king. His face is even on the Statue of Liberty. And, well, like I said, I wouldn't quite say he was ridiculed, but close. You see, the music scene had gone past him, and nobody bought his records. Nobody young wanted to listen to him or be like him. Nobody went to see his movies, as far as I know. He just wasn't in anybody's mind. Two or three times we were up in Hollywood, and he had sent some of the Memphis Mafia down to where we were to bring us up to see Elvis. But none of us went. Because it seemed like a sorry thing to do. I don't know if I would have wanted to see Elvis like that. I wanted to see the powerful, mystical Elvis that had crash-landed from a burning star onto American soil. The Elvis that was bursting with life. That's the Elvis that inspired us to all the possibilities of life. And that Elvis was gone, had left the building."

Clearly, Dylan wants to make sure he doesn't flame out like Elvis. Not a minute of his Paris or Amsterdam shows were golden-oldie dial-ins. "All these shows I play are in the zone," he says. Touring helps Dylan stay focused and fit as a fiddle. Not only are concerts workouts, but all the hustle and bustle of travel keeps him taut and thin. In movement, Dylan believes, man has a chance. Even on the road, boxing remains his primary training exercise. For years, in fact, he had a "professional opponent," Mouse Strauss, who would ferociously spar with him. "Mouse could walk on his hands across a football field," Dylan says. "He taught me the pugilistic rudiments back a while ago, maybe 20 or 30 years. That's not when I started, though. Boxing was a part of the curriculum when I went to high school. Then it was taken out of the school system, I think maybe in '58. But it was always good for me because it was kind of an individualist thing. You didn't need to be part of a team. And I liked that."

I tell Dylan about a bootleg CD producer Bob Johnston once sent me of him sounding drunk crooning "Yesterday" with Johnny Cash. His eyes open wide. "Me and Johnny would sit around hotel rooms in London and sing all kinds of stuff into a tape recorder," he says. "As far as I know those tapes have never surfaced anywhere. But they've been in a few films here and there. I don't really remember 'Yesterday.'" When I ask him if he thinks much about Cash, who died in September 2003, he turns somber.

"Yeah, I do. I do miss him. But I started missing him 10 years before he actually kicked the bucket."

"What does that mean?" I ask.

"You know," he says, "it's hard to talk about. I tell people if they are interested that they should listen to Johnny on his Sun records and reject all that notorious low-grade stuff he did in his later years. It can't hold a candlelight to the frightening depth of the man that you hear on his early records. That's the only way he should be remembered."

DYLAN HAS BECOME OUR GREAT AMERICAN poet of drifting, inheriting a baton that was passed from Walt Whitman to Vachel Lindsay to Carl Sandburg to Allen Ginsberg. It was Sandburg, in fact, who captured Dylan's imagination. The Illinois populist represented the poetic flip side of his endless fascination with Woody Guthrie. Just as Dylan famously sat at Guthrie's sickbed in Greystone Hospital in New Jersey, he spontaneously drove with friends from New York to Hendersonville, North Carolina, simply to bang on the screened-in door of his all-seasons hero. It was in early February 1964. Mrs. Sandburg greeted the stoned-out New Yorkers with Appalachian warmth. "I am a poet," is how Dylan introduced himself to her. "My name is Robert Dylan, and I would like to see Mr. Sandburg." The 86-year-old Sandburg had collected more than 280 ballads in *The American Songbag*, and Dylan wanted to discuss them. "I had three records out at the time," Dylan says, laughing at his youthful temerity. "The *Times They Are a-Changin'* record was the one I gave him a copy of. Of course he had never heard of me." After just 20 minutes, Sandburg excused himself. While Dylan felt it was a pleasant exchange, he didn't get to discuss "I'm a-Ridin' Old Paint" or "Frankie & Albert" with the bard. I ask Dylan whether it was worth the drive to North Carolina. "Oh, yeah," Dylan says. "It

was worth meeting him. He was the Grand Ol' Man at the time. I always liked his poetry because it was so simple and poignant. You didn't need reference books to read him."

More famously, around this time Dylan forged a bond with Ginsberg, whose poem "Howl" Dylan had practically memorized line by line. "I like Ginsberg when he invented his own language," Dylan says. "When he put his - nobody I don't think did that before - language down on paper. There's definitely a Ginsbergian language. And I don't think anybody uses it, because nobody has ever caught on to it. But it's powerful, confident language. All that neon jukebox and lonesome farms and grandfather night stuff. The way he puts words together. The ways that, you know, he used the English vocabulary, sharp words that seem to sweat as you read them."

Ginsberg once told me a story about a night in the 1980s when Dylan raced over to his East Village apartment, hungry for a title to what eventually became the album *Empire Burlesque*. I ask Dylan whether he recalls the incident. "Yeah, of course!" he says. "I went over to see Allen. I think I played [the songs] to him over at his place at 5th Street and Avenue B. I played it for him because I thought he would like it. I never dreamed that Ginsberg would latch on to the pop-music world. I always thought they were jazz guys. I asked Allen what he would think a good title for this record was. And he listened. And he thought for a moment. And he said, 'Razzmatazz.'" Dylan laughs and says, "I was

"In my universe, Chuck Berry is irreplaceable. His presence is everywhere, but you never know it. The world treated him so nasty. But in the end, it was the world that got beat."

kind of speechless. It was not the kind of title that I was expecting. I wasn't sure about that idea. Later on, though, I realized that he might be right. I probably should have called it that."

When tabulating literary influences, Dylan summons the name Walt Whitman, for *Leaves of Grass* continues to inspire him. Toward the end of his life, Whitman was preparing a "Death-Bed" edition of *Leaves of Grass*, reflecting on the indignities and ragged joys of growing old. "I don't think the dream of Whitman has ever been fulfilled," Dylan says. "I don't know if Whitman's spirit is still here. It's hard to say if it holds up except maybe in a nostalgic sense. That westward-expansion thing has been dead for a while now. When Whitman started out, he had such great faith in humankind. His mind must have been destroyed when the War between the States fell at his front door. His vision, which was so massively phallic, suddenly must have become plundered, ruined and emasculated when he saw all that indescribable destruction."

We talk about Whitman serving as a nurse in a Washington, D.C., hospital during the Civil War, draining gangrene from a wounded soldier's limbs. "I think you can see the change in Whitman," Dylan says. "Before that and after that. He had the most grand view of America. Almost like he's America himself. He's just so big, and he's all that there is. The Greek Empire. The Roman Empire. The British Empire. All of European history gone. Whitman is the New World. That's what Whitman is all about. But it isn't the New World anymore. Poor man. He was hounded and mistreated, too, in his lifetime. And ridiculed. Emerson, Thoreau, all those guys, you don't know what they really thought of him."

IF ANY AMERICAN PERSONIFIES LIFE ON WHAT Whitman called the "open road," it's Bob Dylan. Traveling allows Dylan's aloofness to ferment into clarity. Woody Guthrie, Blind Willie McTell and Jack Kerouac treasured this rootless way too. "On the Road speeds by like a freight train," Dylan tells me. "It's all movement and words and lusty instincts that come alive like you're riding on a train. Kerouac moves so fast with his words. No ambiguity. It was very emblematic of the time. You grabbed a hold of the train, hopped on and went along with him, hanging on for dear life. I think that's what affected me more than whatever he was writing about. It was his style of writing that affected us in such a virile way. I tried reading some of his books later, but I never felt that movement again."

Sometimes on the road Dylan stops by the homes or graves of musicians he admires. He once went to Tupelo, Mississippi, to soak in the essence of Elvis. He's made pilgrimages in Texas to search out Buddy Holly and Roy Orbison. I ask Dylan if he minds people visiting Hibbing or Duluth or Minneapolis searching for the root of his talent. "Not at all," he surprisingly says. "That town where I grew up hasn't really changed that much, so whatever was in the air before is probably still there. I go through once in a while coming down from Canada. I'll stop there and wander around." As for Duluth, where his grandparents



A recent Dylan painting evokes a disappearing America.

lived, he thinks it's one of the country's forgotten gems. "You'll never see another town like Duluth," he says. "It's not a tourist destination, but it probably should be. Depends what season you're in there, though. There are only two seasons: damp and cold. I like the way the hills tumble to the waterfront and the way the wind blows around the grain elevators. The train yards go on forever too. It's old-age industrial, that's what it is. You'll see it from the top of the hill for miles and miles before you get there. You won't believe your eyes. I'll give you a medal if you get out alive."

Dylan then recounts a recent side excursion he made from Minnesota to Manitoba. "I went to see Neil Young's house in Winnipeg," he says. "I just felt compelled. I wanted to see his bedroom. Where he looked out of the windows. Where he dreamed. Where he walked out of the door every day. Wanted to see what's around his neighborhood in

Winnipeg. And I did just that."

"How did you do that?"

"I don't know," he answers. "Somebody found out for me where he used to live. I mean, there's no marker or anything. And some people were living in his house. He lived in an upstairs duplex with his mother. I wanted to walk the steps that Neil walked every day."

"Does he know you did that?" I ask.

"I don't think so," Dylan says with a grin. "I was meaning to send him a card afterward and tell him that. That I'd been there. Where he used to hang out and where he started out. Neil, I respect him so much."

Long a master of disguise, Dylan can slip into truck stops or taprooms with relative ease. He's learned the art of blending in. If necessary, there is always a sweatshirt hood. Irregular in his daily routine, mainly a night owl, Dylan sometimes draws sketches for his paintings. For years, Dylan's artwork was mostly monochromatic, but recently, in his Drawn Blank series, he has added bursts of color to his drawings. He likes dazzling purples, pinks and sunflower yellow. For all of his bouts of lyrical darkness, Dylan, like Van Gogh, relishes color, and he lets it show; even when the subject matter is a dismal rail yard or a ramshackle house.

When I question Dylan about his genius for disconnecting from the rat race, he quotes Scipio. "Scipio, the great conqueror of Hannibal, who says, 'I'm never in such good company as when I'm alone.'" To Dylan, this is ancient folk wisdom to live by. Wisdom that Hank Williams understood. Later in our conversation, he quotes Scipio again. "I'm never so busy," he says, "as when I've got nothing to do." (I get the weird feeling that this maxim will soon show up in a new Dylan lyric.) "A person's solitude is important," Dylan tells me in teacher mode. "You have to learn about yourself and figure things out, and that's a good way to do it. Obviously, though, too much of it is no good. You can abuse anything."

Dylan has become habituated to eminence. Wherever he goes, people treat him like a king. A cross eye from Dylan can have a devastating effect on a roadie or band member's psyche. Deeply idiosyncratic, mood changing by the minute, Dylan has an unerring ability to make anyone in the room feel [Cont. on 76]

[Cont. from 49] they're not equal to the talent present. But he also plays shaman and sprinkles your life with magic dust. When a musician friend turns ill, Dylan plays one of that musician's songs in concert as a personal tribute. Months before Mike Bloomfield died of a drug overdose, Dylan, learning he was struggling, reunited with him in San Francisco to play "Like a Rolling Stone" one last triumphant time. Playing the role of passing angel, Dylan has sung the songs of Jerry Garcia, Warren Zevon, Frank Sinatra, George Harrison and Waylon Jennings, to name just a few, soon after they died, as a spontaneous tribute to their artistry.

Dylan spends most of the afternoon of April 9th at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. I am not allowed to come along. But later he recaps to me what crossed his mind, like who his favorite artists are. "Well, of course, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko are good as far as Americans go, and I guess George Bellows and Thomas Hart Benton are OK," he says. "But this guy here, from this town, Rembrandt, is one of my two favorite painters. I like his work because it's rough, crude and beautiful. Caravaggio's the other one. I'd probably go a hundred miles for a chance to see a Caravaggio painting or a Bernini sculpture. You know who I like a lot is [J.M.W.] Turner, the English painter. Art is artillery. And those guys, especially Caravaggio and Rembrandt, used it in its most effective manner. After seeing their work, I'm not even so sure how I feel about Picasso, to tell you the truth."

"Why's that?" I ask.

"Lots of reasons," he says. "He was a renegade painter. He just painted what he wanted. He didn't have anybody over him. I don't think he was ever pushed to the degree that those other guys were. I don't feel Picasso's paintings like I feel the other work I just mentioned. I like Jacques-Louis David a lot, too, although he was a propagandist painter. David's the artist who did the emblematic painting of 'Napoleon at the Saint-Bernard Pass' and 'The Death of Marat.'" As for Andy Warhol, Dylan glares at me for bringing his name into the heavyweight mix. "Only as a cultural figure," he says. "Not as an artist."

After that evening's show at the Heineken Music Hall - at around 11:30 p.m. - I interview Dylan again. Because it is Easter weekend, I decide to push him on the importance of Christian Scripture in his life. "Well, sure," he says, "that and those other first books I read were really biblical stuff. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Ben-Hur*. Those were the books that I remembered reading and finding religion in. Later on, I started reading over and over again Plutarch and his *Roman Lives*. And the writers Cicero, Tacitus and Marcus Aurelius. . . . I like the morality thing. People talk about it all the

time. Some say you can't legislate morality. Well, maybe not. But morality has gotten kind of a bad rap. In Roman thought, morality is broken down into basically four things. Wisdom, Justice, Moderation and Courage. All of these are the elements that would make up the depth of a person's morality. And then that would dictate the types of behavior patterns you'd use to respond in any given situation. I don't look at morality as a religious thing."

But to Dylan, morality is often about holding firm to personal principles. We talk about his refusal to capitulate to CBS censors back in 1963 when he was to appear on *The Ed Sullivan Show* for the first time. The network had wanted Dylan to play a Clancy Brothers song, even though he had rehearsed "Talkin' John Birch Paranoid Blues." The censors refused to allow a so-called "commie" protest song into America's Cold War living rooms. Dylan wouldn't give in. He now views the walk-off as a seminal event in his early career. "Ed [Sullivan] was behind me, but the censors came down, and they didn't want me to play that particular song," he says.

"Some say you can't legislate morality. Well, maybe not. But morality has gotten a bad rap."

"I just had it in my mind to do that particular song. I'd rehearsed it, and it went down well. And I knew everybody back home would be watching me on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. But then I walked off *The Ed Sullivan Show*, and they couldn't have a chance to see me. So I don't know what that says about me as a person. That was the biggest TV show ever at that time, and it was broadcast on Sunday night. Millions of people watched from coast to coast. It was a dream come true just to be on that stage. Everybody knew that."

Bolting from *The Ed Sullivan Show* was the true turning point in Dylan's life script, even more significant than going electric at Newport. From that moment onward, Dylan would only play by his rules. His spine stiffened. When a recording artist blew off Ed Sullivan. . . well, the James Dean outsider avenue was the only option left. But how did Dylan's mother and father back in Minnesota feel about little Bobby stiffing Mr. Sullivan? "Well, we grew up without TV, really," Dylan explains. "TV came in when I was maybe 16. We didn't get the network shows up north. We only got TV from about 3:00 till 7:00 when it began to come in. We

had no consciousness of TV. None. It was all live entertainment that would come through town. Those days are long gone. Even the memories have been obliterated. I think maybe I was in the last generation that grew up like that. We didn't see Dick Clark. I think *Ed Sullivan* came in the last year I was at home. Didn't see Elvis on *Ed Sullivan* because we didn't get that. It was a more innocent way of life. Imagination is what you had and maybe all you had."

More than any recent American artist, with the possible exception of the late collage painter Robert Rauschenberg, Dylan has repeatedly challenged his own intellect and faith. Nothing is ever fully settled. His mind is always crowded with future projects: a series of Brazil-inspired paintings, the next installment of *Chronicles*, a TV special, an orchestra playing new arrangements of his timeless standards, and the composition of more song-poems for the ages sometimes casually written on hotel letterhead. He is going out in life as a gnarled bluesman able to hold his head high, a tried-and-true folkloric figure who's outfoxed even B'r'er Rabbit.

When President Sarkozy, looking to make small talk, asked Dylan, "Where do you live?" the quick response was a few simple words: "Right here. . . . No. I'm just joking. I'm from the Lone Star State." (Dylan ended by giving Sarkozy a Texas-style belt buckle as a gift.)

Technically, Dylan's answer wasn't true. Dylan belongs to no city or state. There is Dylan the family man who spends time in California with his children and grandchildren in Malibu, West Hollywood and Beverly Hills. Sometimes Dylan lingers in the Bay Area for weeks at a time, sketching fishmongers and longshoremen. As a New York Yankee fan, he can be found sitting behind first base in the Bronx on random autumnal nights, wishing Mickey Mantle were still batting cleanup. But it's Minnesota's north country, which seems to always lie just over the frozen brow of a long-remembered field, where the road still reaches into the void on below-zero blue winter days, that remains Dylan's touchstone place. That's the American landscape, which has influenced him most. The Great Lakes region is where he learned Mexican *conjunto* music by way of Polish polka bands. You can't find the real Dylan spirit in Greenwich Village or an L.A. studio, a Yazoo River juke joint or a Laredo cafe. For underneath all the mercurial antics and standing ovations, Dylan is so down-home that he considers the boondocks of Hibbing-Duluth to be far grander than Paris.

"The air is so pure there," he says. "And the brooks and rivers are still running. The forests are thick, and the landscape is brutal. And the sky is still blue up there. It is still pretty untarnished. It's still off the beaten path. But I hardly ever go back." ❶