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Who Are You Anyway?



MR TAMBOURINE MAN clarifies another way in which *Another Side of Bob Dylan* gains in immediacy, which is by direct address. ‘You’ first appears early in Dylan’s recordings, in the first track of his first LP, YOU’RE NO GOOD – and that would be the attitude of some of his best songs. The first of his songs on record (leaving aside the comic monologue, TALKIN’ NEW YORK) is also in what might be called ‘half-dialogue’ form. It is not a song for or about, but a song *to* Woody, set dramatically by Woody’s side, “a thousand miles from my home”.

The lyric addressed to ‘you’ in popular music stems from the stage – the revue and the musical – which provides it with a dramatic context. Since the early period of popular music on record, dominated by the show-song, it has become such a universal convention that we tend to forget that it is one. But a second-person address is far from common in the folk song from which Dylan drew his first forms, and not much more so in the earlier blues, which seem to have acquired it as they mingled in the mainstream.

What is common in the folk ballad, and hardly used at all in pop song, is full dialogue, two voices rendered by one. This can achieve some surprising effects, as for example in the British ballad ‘The White Cockade’, a song about enlistment, which begins in the voice of the soldier, explaining how he came to be persuaded – with “a flowing bowl of grog” and an advance of “two guineas and a crown” – then skips to the complaint of the maid, who curses the man that enlisted her ploughboy “and sent him away from me”, and then skips back to the soldier, who, it turns out, is not yet “away” but here listening to her:

Then he took out a handkerchief and wiped a flowing eye:
 "Leave off your lamentations, likewise your mournful cries..."

He promises to marry her on his return, and the last verse skips again to her, now presumably singing her devotion in his absence:

Oh yes, me love's enlisted and I for him will rove
 And carve his name in every tree that grows in yonder grove

Devices like this enable the folk ballads about love to be more rounded, to portray relationships better than almost all pop love-songs. (It is interesting that Country & Western, the form of popular music most closely related to the ballads, is also the one that deals most thoroughly with everyday relationships – not only boy-girl love, but marriage, divorce, childhood, parenthood, bereavement, employment and so on.) The pop song with its antecedents on the stage must be one-sided, insofar as it is conceived as a sung speech from a dialogue. This is not the only form it can take, of course: it might as well be a sung soliloquy, addressed to a 'her' or 'him', or a 'you' who is offstage. Still it is the complaint, the plea, the promise, the seduction or rejection of one party only.

Where it gains is in erotic intensity. It can dramatise in an immediate way our passions – our desire, sorrow, frustration or rapture under Eros' sway. Developed along this line, the pop song began to embrace intimacies that were never part of the musical show, perhaps under the influence of the movies with their bedroom scenes and close-up kisses. To cite an example I've already mentioned, 'Go Slow', as sung by Julie London, is musical pillow-talk, in which a woman advises her lover how most to please her. It can only be visualised as being sung in bed, or on the way there. The same is true of many of London's torch-songs, which transpose the sultry seductress-essence of film to the microgroove. (She was a Hollywood actress

as well as a singer.) The images they conjure are cinematic, and anyone who has seen enough movies of the period will know exactly how these scenes are costumed, staged and lit. They are far more libidinous, of course, than any movie equivalents; and, apart from occasional dance-as-seduction numbers, they allow the female to be far more forthcoming than the love-scenes of that era, or of this, generally.

These developments are pertinent, too, to the great male heart-throbs leading up to Elvis, like Sinatra and, at the beginning of the line, Bing Crosby, the king of the crooners. Crooning – singing softly, as to one other person, in front of an orchestra – was made possible by the electrical microphone. It meant that for every female fan, 'you' in the song could become *you*, the listener – hence that fervent, swooning adoration which Bing was the first pop singer to excite. For the male, *he*, with his assured sexual success, becomes the voice of your desires: you yourself say 'you'. In this vein, no-one has ever played the microphone as well as Elvis. Just as the thrill of his fast songs is the way you can hear him move, so his ballads are filled with the sensual presence of his mouth, in intense close-up, his breath, and the warm resonance of his chest.

Isn't Dylan as a singer the antithesis of this whole strain, though? In the main, yes. It's revealing that his early hero from the heart-throb era was Johnny Ray, whose voice, rising out of his deafness, always sounded like what his best-known record called it, a 'Cry', cried as though there were no-one else in the world, let alone in the room. Another early model from when Dylan first began to play, sing and write, was Hank Williams, whose voice hardly conveyed intimacy either, with its hard, broken edge. In fact, its honesty is often so cutting because it sings what has not been spoken. Do we really believe he says to his wife:

Well, you start your jaws a-waggin' and they never stop.
 You never shut up until I blow my top...

– or is it just what he wants to say?

A telling example of how Williams uses 'you' is 'There'll Be No Teardrops Tonight', in which the groom on the night before his wedding addresses his bride-to-be, saying that he knows she has another lover:

I'll pretend that you still love me
When you wear your veil of white,
Though I know you love another,
Still there'll be no teardrops tonight.

Shame, oh shame for what you're doing.
Other arms will hold you tight,
But you don't care who's life you ruin,
So there'll be no teardrops tonight.

The catch is that – as he has decided to marry her anyway, and keep her secret as his secret, which is why "there'll be no teardrops tonight" – what the singer says to "you" in the song is precisely what he will not say.

Whether or not he absorbed the idea from Hank Williams, Dylan has certainly favoured this form of dissociated dialogue. There's an inkling of it already in *SONG TO WOODY*, which is addressed face-to-face, as it were, but to someone who cannot reply, or at least not in the same mode, since by the time Dylan came to see him, Guthrie was no longer able to sing and play, and had difficulty even speaking.

On *Freewheelin'* the dissociation of the 'you' song is much more apparent. *GIRL OF THE NORTH COUNTRY*, a love-song of uncommon gentleness, is also unusual in that its subject is a 'she', and 'you' is an intermediary:

Please see for me if her hair hangs long,
If it rolls and flows all down her breast.

So direct address is used to heighten the awareness of distance which is the song's theme.

MASTERS OF WAR has this element of distance, too, but to different effect. By directly addressing those who cannot be directly addressed ("You that hide behind walls / You that hide behind desks") it increases the power – the armour-piercing power, we might call it – of the lone voice crying out against them: "I just want you to know / I can see through your masks."

A HARD RAIN'S A-GONNA FALL is a rare example of the full dialogue form of folk song, though the answers of 'I don't really seem to be addressed to 'you'. If one were to try to stage this scene, wouldn't the outpouring of images from the "blue-eyed son" be directed at a point in mid-air, in a fit of distraction, a trance almost, rather than to the mother directly?

A couple of years later, Dylan returned to the mother-and-son scenario for an equally large and bleak panorama, *IT'S ALRIGHT, MA (I'M ONLY BLEEDING)*, whose subtitle surely evokes the scene of Jesus on the cross speaking to, and beyond, his mother. In that song, we have no real sense of her presence at all: it is more easily envisaged as a letter home than as direct speech. Yet there is a suggestion of her closeness – close enough to hear his breath – in the lines:

So don't fear
If you hear
A foreign sound
To your ear:
It's alright, ma,
I'm only sighing.

That closeness echoes the speech of Tom Joad to his mother towards the end of *The Grapes of Wrath*, the book that led

Dylan to discover Woody Guthrie. He tells her as he leaves her, a wanted man: "I'll be all aroun' in the dark. I'll be ever'where – wherever you look." In *IT'S ALRIGHT, MA*, we can see this reversed: the mother all around, as the young man surveys the life into which she has brought him. There is a characteristic paradox, though, and that twist of the absurd that marks it as Dylan's, in this huge catalogue of the world's ills couched in the form of reassuring his mother that he's fine, just fine.

The song that has the clearest dialogue form on *Freewheelin'* is *DON'T THINK TWICE, IT'S ALL RIGHT*, a companion to *A HARD RAIN* at the growing point of his art. This is where he plays most clearly upon the paradox, the dissociated nature of the dialogue; for this outspoken final settling of the account between two lovers is also explicitly *unheard*.

It ain't no use in callin' out my name, gal,
I can't hear you any more.

And she, presumably, cannot hear him.

If we were to stage this song, I think the result might well be something like a scene from an early Brecht play – from *Baal*, perhaps. There is that same tough, bruised persona that Brecht often wore in his early love lyrics. The time is before morning; there is a wall with a window, where the woman is sleeping, from which she will look out at dawn; and a road where her lover walks slowly away, singing his song. There's even a hint as to the lighting:

It ain't no use in turnin' on your light, babe,
I'm on the dark side of the road.

The comparison is not fanciful. Suze Rotolo, the young woman walking arm in arm with the artist on the front of the

record, was involved in a fringe production of Brecht, and Dylan apparently attended rehearsals with interest.

It is his sense of drama, conveyed by the direct address and the evocation of a setting, that lends Dylan's songs in this mode their vividness. We hear them as soliloquy rather than inner monologue. In this case, the woman addressed is not so much absent as *offstage*. With this form, he can create a speaking character, and something of the character he is speaking to; and, in a subtle but involving way, a whole world that radiates out from this central relationship. *DON'T THINK TWICE*, sounding a note not heard before in popular song, is the first entrance into one of these 'Dylanesque' worlds, with its distinctive, melancholic atmosphere, its visionary starkness and variable weather.

The influence of Brecht is at its strongest on *The Times* *They Are A-Changin'* – perhaps even stronger than that of Woody Guthrie, though this is supposed to be Dylan at his most Guthriesque. Again, it is their dramatic quality that has kept these motivated, topical songs as vivid and forceful today as when they were recorded. The political nature of the record – political in the broadest sense, as concerned with the conditions and governance of society – means few songs of personal relation, but there are some interesting developments of the 'you' lyric.

One of these is *BALLAD OF HOLLIS BROWN*, which switches from "he" to "you" after the first verse. "Hollis Brown, he lived on the outside of town" it begins, with a characteristic compression of the common forms of speech – 'on the outskirts of town', 'the other side of town', 'outside of town' – into a new and fitting phrase, "*on the outside of town*", to portray social exclusion in a single offhand stroke. In the second verse both tense and pronoun shift, after an indeterminate line, to a definite second-person present:

address, but it does occur at key points, namely the beginning, the middle and the end, in ALL I REALLY WANT TO DO, TO RAMONA and IT AIN'T ME, BABE.

Actually, the practice of bracketing a record with 'dialogue' of two contrasting types can be traced back to the first album, starting with the comic denouncement of YOU'RE NO GOOD and ending with the tragic plea of SEE THAT MY GRAVE IS KEPT CLEAN. *The Times*, likewise, opens with the bold and clear public announcement of the title song and closes with the obviously heartfelt but hesitant, circuitous and apparently drink-befuddled confession of RESTLESS FAREWELL.

On *Another Side*, the contrast of beginning and end could not be clearer: the amorous approach, ALL I REALLY WANT TO DO, against the flat rejection, IT AIN'T ME, BABE; the light against the sad tone. Midway between them stands TO RAMONA, upon which this opposition pivots, a richer and subtler song than either. Before saying more about it, though, I would like to turn aside to explain further the image of the pivot.



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I Plan It All And I Take My Place

I've never really understood how the Beatles could be credited with inventing the LP as an artistic unit. I can see that *Sergeant Pepper* had the kind of impact that previously only pop singles had had. It was swallowed whole, as it were; the entire LP being played repeatedly over and over on the radio in the days of its first appearance. In that sense it marks a definite turning point, a shift of focus from single to album in the pop market. But there is no question of the Beatles being the first to think of making a unified LP: what was Miles Davis and Gil Evans's *Sketches of Spain* in 1960; or Charles Mingus's *Tijuana Moods* in 1957; or Frank Sinatra and Nelson Riddle's *In the Wee Small Hours* (1955) or *Come Fly With Me* (1958)?

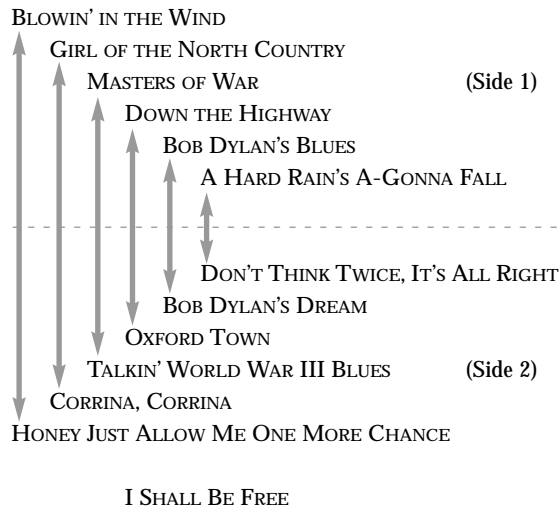
For that matter, Woody Guthrie's *Dust Bowl Ballads*, released in 1935 as an actual 'album' (i.e. a package containing several 78s; re-released for the first time on LP in 1964, coincidentally) was a pretty early example of the concept album. The Beatles may have been the first to aim for larger form in the amnesic context of rock, but even here, Dylan, who joined them in that field in 1965, had been practising the art of composing LPs ever since he recorded his first in 1961.

I don't know of anybody else emulating the specific form which he developed over his first three LPs, though people almost certainly have. It takes the long-playing record as a physical object – two independent sequences of music of roughly the same length, one stamped on the obverse of the other, nominally 1 and 2, or A and B, but not actually fixed in

order – and works these material conditions into an artistic device.

The first step to understanding this form is to think of the two sides as *reflecting* each other in two parallel sequences, so that tracks 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 on one side are echoed somehow in tracks 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 on the other. Dylan's form takes this a step further by *fully reflecting* the two sequences, making one the reverse of the other, so that the themes that appear in the order A, B, C, D, E on one side appear in the songs on the other side in the order E, D, C, B, A. The linking of the paired songs is often by contrast as much as by similarity; for example, two diametrically opposed treatments of the same theme.

The first sketch of this design is on the first album, where the two original compositions, TALKIN' NEW YORK and SONG TO WOODY, are placed in corresponding, reversed positions, second on side 1, and second to last on side 2. On *Freewheelin'* the scheme is worked out in full:

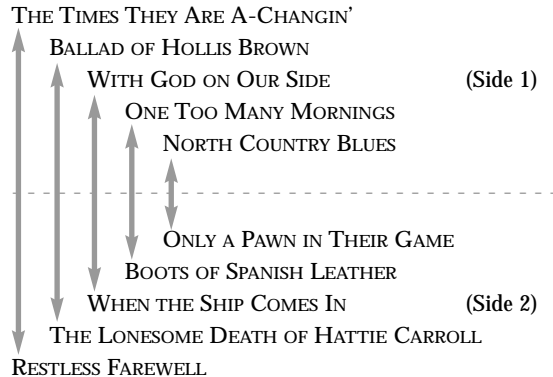


Some of the links are stronger than others. We can see, for example, that two gentle love songs correspond, GIRL OF THE NORTH COUNTRY and CORRINA, CORRINA; as do two songs about war, MASTERS OF WAR and TALKIN' WORLD WAR III BLUES; and two about Bob Dylan, BOB DYLAN'S BLUES and BOB DYLAN'S DREAM. The pairing of the BLUES and the DREAM, which is based on the English ballad 'Lord Franklin', gives a clue to the link between DOWN THE HIGHWAY and OXFORD TOWN, the album's purest evocations of blues and country traditions, respectively, black and white. As for the innermost couple, HARD RAIN and DON'T THINK TWICE, they are the growing point of this phase, pointing in different ways to the future of Dylan's songwriting. They are also paired by contrast: the departure, of lover from lover; and the homecoming, of son to mother.

The oddest and also most informative coupling is the outermost, of BLOWN' IN THE WIND with HONEY JUST ALLOW ME ONE MORE CHANCE. The former was really the song that secured Dylan's position – it was the reason why everything had changed between the appearance of his first album and this one. ONE MORE CHANCE, on the other hand, is *Freewheelin's* one throwback to the gulping and frenetic comic blues style of *Bob Dylan*. He acknowledges BLOWN' IN THE WIND's importance by leading off with it, but the pairing with ONE MORE CHANCE shows him symbolically consigning it to the past, already determined not to be contained by his own former achievements. Hence the 'freewheeling' tailpiece, I SHALL BE FREE, escaping the structure.

F*reewheelin'* is arranged around a fairly loose net of associations. On the next album, *Times*, that form is tightened up and made symmetrical. The 'argument' of the record is built up dialectically, as befits its maker's most political work. That this construction also relates to a sense of con-

straint felt by the artist – which he eventually broke out from, angrily – can be seen in the pairing of the first and the last songs:



RESTLESS FAREWELL shares some points with I SHALL BE FREE. They're both 'moving on' songs to close out their respective records, and both inebriated:

Oh you ask me why I'm drunk all a time,
 It levels my head and eases my mind.
 I just walk along and stroll and sing,
 I see better days and I do better things...

he chants tipsily at the end of I SHALL BE FREE. And RESTLESS FAREWELL is set in this boozy haze:

... the bottles are done,
 We've killed each one,
 And the table's full and overflowed,
 And the corner sign
 Says it's closing time
 So I'll bid farewell and be down the road.

The difference is all in the tone, of course. RESTLESS FAREWELL can't just bounce out of the door to "catch dinosaurs" and "make love to Elizabeth Taylor" like I SHALL BE FREE. It has to stand on the threshold and explain itself away. Why? Because of what its partner on the other side of the record has proclaimed: a revolution, a battle, a 'flood' of change that overrides all other considerations. How, in the thick of this momentous event, can Dylan now be justifying his intention (as we can see it retrospectively) to go on and make a record like *Another Side*, wholly concerned with personal moments?

The explanation, foreshadowing the fuzzy logic of *Another Side*, is not easy to follow – though the sharp depiction of the end of a night of drinking gives good dramatic grounds for the thought to ramble. The topic that the singer's mind keeps circling is "time". The word is used five times, in different contexts, occurring in every verse but the third. In this, FAREWELL is already an antithesis to the title song. While that proposes "the times" – the movement of time itself – as a single, irresistible engine of change, this last song suggests that "time" is not such a straightforward idea, but has varying meanings; that there may be several different "times".

It is the third verse that confronts the challenge of THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN' most directly. This is the middle verse, and the song seems to revolve around it. To paraphrase: the first verse says, I like to spend my money on showing my friends a good time, but now it's time to go. The second says, I don't have time for a committed relationship with a woman. And the third – switching from attachment to antagonism, but sticking with commitment, or lack of it – concerns fighting for a cause. Again, using the most basic symbol for the triumph of good over evil, which is the coming of light after darkness, day after night, time itself is seen as bringing inevitable victory in the struggle. The conclusion is peculiar, though:

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.

He slips easily out of the logic of his political metaphor – that the victory of a good cause is as inevitable as the rising of the sun, so you don't really need *me* to help it, do you? – and into the logic of the party-goer – that if you stay till morning, as somebody surely will, you're bound to get caught up in the next round. So he arrives at his desired conclusion – that it is time for him to leave the party – by sleight of hand.

This is the pivotal point of the song – what it set out to prove. The fourth verse turns back towards the second, dealing with music and self-expression and friendship whereas that had dealt with love. And the last verse touches again, like the first, on the artist as a social creature, and on the effect of his success. Here we come to the final refutation of THE TIMES:

Oh a false clock tries to tick out my time,
 To disgrace, distract and bother me,
 And the dirt of gossip blows into my face
 And the dust of rumours covers me.

This “false clock” is surely, in this context, the time measured by the media, the never-quite-present of the news and current affairs, which he was no longer simply a commentator on, but was becoming a subject of. How can I write on that basis, he seems to say, when I know from experience how much of it is gossip and rumours? Likewise, the first verse implies, how long can I sing about poverty, when I have more money than I know what to do with?

