

INTRODUCTION

The first publication of *No Direction Home* in September 1986 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of Robert Shelton's celebrated *New York Times* review of "a bright new face in folk music."¹ This new edition coincides with its fiftieth, and the seventieth birthday of its subject.

Shelton's 400 words, the four-column headline announcing the arrival of "Bob Dylan: A Distinctive Folk-Song Stylist," described a young man "bursting at the seams with talent" whose past mattered less than his future. Its prescience was remarkable, for Dylan's talent was raw indeed and three record companies had failed to spot his potential. The fourth, Columbia, offered him a contract the day after the review appeared, before they had heard him sing a note.

As Suze Rotolo reflected years later: "Robert Shelton's review, without a doubt, made Dylan's career ... That review was unprecedented. Shelton had not given a review like that for anybody."² In her memoir, *A Freewheelin' Time*, Rotolo describes how she and Dylan bought an early edition of the *Times* at the kiosk on Sheridan Square and took it across the street to an all-night deli. "Then we went back and bought more copies."³

Yet Shelton never claimed to have "discovered" Dylan ("he discovered himself") and, when his magnum opus was published, many friends and colleagues realized for the first time that the quiet American in their midst was rather more than simply a regional critic (Shelton was by then, somewhat implausibly, Arts Editor of the *Brighton Evening Argus*, a south-coast city daily). When he died, on December 11, 1995, after a final burst of freelancing, this time as film critic of the *Birmingham Post*, new friends in the Guild of Regional Film Writers, of which he was a founder, were similarly astonished. As Michael Gray noted in his *Guardian* obituary, Shelton "displayed in this final phase of his life the same rare qualities as in his New York heyday: he was gregarious, warm, a good listener, secretive to a fault about his own distinguished past, and wholeheartedly committed to the humane arts."⁴

Gregarious, warm, a good listener. That last quality is the *sine qua non* of any serious music critic, but the first two were no less important in Shelton's quest to seek out burgeoning talent in the clubs and coffeehouses of 1960s Greenwich Village, New York's perennial bohemia, and to bring it to the attention of America at large. Judy Collins remembers him as both a friend and critic "with the intelligence and perception and the ability to get the fact that something rare and wonderful was happening in the world of music and social consciousness" and who wrote about it with "a crisp and unique clarity."⁵ For Janis Ian, who has long acknowledged the role Shelton played in her early career, bringing her to the attention of conductor-composer Leonard Bernstein, "Bob Shelton exemplified all the best in music writing—stylistically, ethically, morally. He foresaw trends through the sheer exuberance of listening, and went out on a limb for so many of us."⁶

Robert Shelton Shapiro was born in Chicago on June 28, 1926, the son of a research chemist and a homemaker. Graduating from high school in June 1943, with his parents' permission he dropped the family surname, their shared feeling being that "to be immediately identifiable with any minority group was not an asset." Soon, he was in the Army, shipping to France in the wake of its reclamation by the Allies. So began a life-long passion for French culture in particular and for Europe in general. Back in civvy street at the end of War, he returned to Chicago and Northwestern University's School of Journalism, emerging as a Bachelor of Science.

By February 1951, he was in New York, hired as a copy boy on the *New York Times* and trained as a reader, writing news on the side. His cuttings file reveals short items on voting rights, community affairs, education, and the ending of racial discrimination at the National Theatre in Washington. Soon he was contributing to a range of magazines: an article on a university-led agricultural experiment in New Jersey for *Colliers*, a piece on how we hear for *Modern Hi-Fi* and, in 1959, a long report for the *Nation* on that summer's Newport Folk Festival.

The Shelton byline seems first to have appeared in the *New York Times* on March 18, 1956 on a piece about hi-fi jargon, the first of several items about records and recordings in general. From January 1958, it appeared regularly above articles on such diverse subjects as southern folk songs from prison; Irish, Jewish, and African music; bluegrass and flamenco; a tour by the Soviet Moiseyev Dance Company;



John Lomax; Oscar Brand (“A Civic Troubadour”); tradition versus art in folk music; “Folk Music on the ‘Hit Parade.’” On November 17, 1960, Shelton noted: “Folk music is leaving the imprint of its big country boots on the night life of New York in unparalleled fashion, from the grimmest Greenwich Village espresso joint to the crook-fingered elegance of the Waldorf Astoria.” Not surprising, then, that come 1960, he was reviewing more and more live music: Theodore Bikel and Odetta at Town Hall, Lightnin’ Hopkins at the Village Gate, Joan Baez at the Y and, in April 1961, John Lee Hooker at Gerde’s. On that occasion, Shelton famously *didn’t* review the support act but Bob Dylan did catch his ear at a Monday night hootenanny in June and, in July, his first New York City concert appearance in a folk marathon at Riverside Church led to a mention in the *Times*.

Beyond reviews, Shelton wrote about music’s connections to everyday life—an early piece examined the role of “freedom songs” in the Civil Rights struggle, another pondered how history could be taught through folk song. The *Times* archive lists 408 articles, the last, March 24, 1969, about the Metropolitan Opera’s “sturdy new production” of *Tosca*, one of a surprising number of classical music reviews.

Ironically, it appears that Shelton owes his career as a music critic to Senator McCarthy. In January 1956, he was subpoenaed to appear before a Senate subcommittee investigating Communist infiltration of the press. The case was actually one of mistaken identity (the Eastland Committee, as it was called, was in pursuit of a Washington-based journalist named Willard Shelton) but, in any event, Robert Shelton refused to testify, arguing that the Committee was infringing freedom of the press and engaging in a smear campaign against the *Times*. Instead he read out a statement: “No one who knows me would doubt my loyalty to the government of the United States. Because I am a loyal American, I must, as a matter of principle, challenge questions into my political beliefs and associations as a violation of my rights under the First Amendment to the Constitution.” The left-leaning *Times* was lily-livered, affirming its commitment to freedom of expression but pledging to dismiss any known Communists—and re-assigning Shelton from news to entertainment and features. Twice convicted, Shelton sued, supported in his fight by the American Civil Liberties Union. Finally, in September 1963, an appeal court ruled two-to-one in his favor. Ultimately, a five-to-two decision in the Supreme Court reversed the convictions.⁷

By then, of course, “Robert Shelton of the *New York Times*” had ploughed his own very distinctive furrow and was, as Jon Pareles wrote in the paper’s obituary, both “catalyst and chronicler of the 1960s folk boom.”⁸ Far lesser critics have made greater claims for themselves. Besides Dylan, and the aforementioned Collins and Ian, innumerable other performers owe him a debt of thanks, among them Joan Baez, whom he reviewed at the 1959 Newport Folk Festival, and Phil Ochs, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Peter, Paul and Mary, Tom Paxton, Janis Joplin, José Feliciano and Frank Zappa.

As Dave Laing notes in his survey of “the folk revival journalism of Robert Shelton,” New York was the capital of the revival and “the New York folk scene was centered on the Greenwich Village district and was populated by a volatile group of musicians, journalists, club-owners and music business entrepreneurs who met frequently on a face-to-face basis. Shelton had established himself as a member of this network by the beginning of the 1960s, not least because of his passionate defense of folk music in an article for the *Village Voice* in 1960.”⁹ Thus, some of his most avid readers, including many of the performers he wrote about, were (or became) friends, simply because they lived and worked in the vicinity of his home, 191 Waverley Place, equidistant from Gerde’s and the White Horse Tavern. Nevertheless, Shelton wrote neither for them, nor even specifically for folk music fans, but for the general reader and record-buyer, many of whom (because the *Times* was then the closest the US came to a national newspaper, and anyway much of its content was syndicated) lived a long way from the Village. For the first time, readers “from California to the New York islands” were invited to follow Shelton into a smoke-filled coffeehouse much as the great Harold C Schonberg took them to Carnegie Hall.

The precise moment when he and Dylan finally agreed to proceed with the project is unclear. On New Year’s Eve 1965, the two men discussed a proposed biography over dinner at the Clique in uptown Manhattan. By that time, Shelton had a number of reasonably large-scale projects under his belt or in train, among them *Born to Win*—a collection of writings by Woody Guthrie, *The Face of Folk Music* with photographer David Gahr, *The Country Music Story*, plus extended essays in various songbooks and, under the pseudonym Stacey Williams, numerous album notes, including that for Elektra’s *Folk Box*, for which he also chose the tracks. Thus, by March 1966, when Shelton joined his subject on the road, he had already built up a significant body of research and writing on both Dylan and the folk movement and he

knew the players as well as anyone. From the outset, it seems clear that Shelton’s intention was a serious study, not a potboiler, though presumably neither party imagined that it would take twenty years to come to fruition. After a flirtation with Viking, he signed a contract with Doubleday and, shortly thereafter, left New York for Europe, spending time in Ireland before coming to Britain, where he would remain.

In an interview in 1987,¹⁰ he summed up his needs as “money and a sympathetic publisher.” His advance had not been ungenerous “but it wasn’t sufficient”—and Shelton wasn’t good with money. Anyway, the costs incurred were considerable and by his own admission he over-researched, expensive in the pre-internet age. He researched not simply Dylan but everything that had informed Dylan’s life and work, socially, politically, culturally. It all had to be contextualized. When he began writing in the early Seventies, what emerged was (as one critic would put it) “fascinating social history,” a study of “the American musical scene and Dylan’s place in it.” But it was long, way too long, and Boswell couldn’t keep pace with his Johnson who, by the mid-Seventies, was once again in high gear. In 1976, Shelton had reached 1966, the motorcycle accident. An appropriate place, he felt, for the conclusion of the first volume of what he now hoped could be a two-volume biography, but the suggestion fell on stony ground.

Freelancing in order to pay the rent, he wrote on and, by the close of 1977, Shelton’s *Dylan* was poised to launch Tour ’74. New chapters and revisions of old ones were dispatched to his publisher but correspondence suggests they met with a deathly silence, even though the success of Dylan’s 1978 world tour made the climate propitious. Furthermore, Shelton’s own reputation was enhanced, with high-profile accounts and an interview during Dylan’s acclaimed London concert visit. In February 1979, Shelton wrote to Doubleday that, though he’d been amassing material, “I haven’t written one further word.”¹¹ He saw “no end to this status quo and status woe” without more money. A year passed, and Shelton was sent “an egregiously poorly edited manuscript,”¹² which convinced him that Doubleday neither liked nor understood the book. Pointing to the public outcry over Albert Goldman’s muckraking biography of Elvis Presley, “longer than my edited, mauled manuscript,” he charged that Doubleday “encouraged me to invade the privacy of Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash and many other characters in my book,” provoking “constant unrelenting pressure for me to sell down the river many of my friends in this book for commercial gain.”¹³

By 1983, Shelton had parted from Doubleday and the contract passed to New English Library in London. Still, the financial and legal arm-twisting continued, and the new editors found themselves routinely on the receiving end of Shelton’s blistering late-night prose. With the resale of US rights to Morrow, Shelton felt that, at last, the manuscript had a simpatico publisher, a feeling confirmed by a telegram from his New York editor: “I AM OVERWHELMED BY THE MAGNIFICENT JOB YOU HAVE DONE ON YOUR BOOK. CONGRATULATIONS AND GRATITUDE.” A few days later, a detailed commentary on the manuscript concluded that the past twenty years had been “wholly justified.”¹⁴

Shelton replied that he could “accept a great many of the suggestions and ideas and queries,” though a hapless copy editor seeking confirmation that “Dylan’s plane was really eight miles high” during his celebrated in-flight interview drew a vitriolic response. Arguments over length were exacerbated when Shelton was forced to accede to the publishers’ demands that the book be brought up to date: with no question of a second volume, vast cuts had now to be found in *earlier* sections of the book. A compromise was reached, whereby Shelton accepted less money in exchange for retaining more words.¹⁵ The prefatory quote to the final chapter revealed his anguish: “a portrait can never be finished; it can only be abandoned.” Until his dying day, Shelton regarded his book as having been “abridged over troubled waters.”

Finally, *No Direction Home* was published and Shelton took to the road for tours of Britain and the US, a prospect that amused Dylan when the two men met in London during the filming of *Hearts of Fire*. International editions followed: European readers, notably in Italy and France, where it made the front page of *Le Monde*, were especially appreciative of the book.

Shelton’s life’s work received a good deal of thunderous applause, though, unsurprisingly, given the weight of expectation, some slow hand-clapping as well. In the years immediately following its publication and with Dylan’s star having waned, some critics and rival biographers saw fit to denigrate both book and author—disregarding the fact that, without that *New York Times* review, Dylan’s career may not have taken off and failing to acknowledge that Shelton was *there*, a witness to all its crucial moments: At Newport ’63 and at the celebrated Philharmonic Hall concert on Halloween 1964. At Newport ’65, when Dylan went electric. On the pivotal 1966 tour with the Hawks. At the Woody Guthrie memorial in 1968

and the Isle of Wight in 1969. Along the way, the two men spent many hours together, often just hanging out, sometimes with their girlfriends, Rotolo and Baez in Dylan's case. They chatted for hours in New York in 1971, during Dylan's long public withdrawal, and talked long into the night on his 1978 tour.

During those crucial years in Greenwich Village, Shelton was part of Dylan's "gang." Dylan's friends were Shelton's friends. As Rotolo recalls in her memoir, evenings sometimes ended at Shelton's apartment where, on one occasion after a long night that had begun at the White Horse Tavern, Dylan fell asleep on the sofa. Thus, Shelton was given unique access to many of those closest to Dylan, including his brother, David, and his parents, Abe and Beatty, to whom no other journalist ever spoke in depth. When news broke of Dylan's motorcycle crash in July 1966, it was Shelton whom Abe Zimmerman called for more information. Shelton also talked to Dylan's childhood friends from Hibbing, including Echo Helstrom, the "Girl from the North Country," and fellow students and friends from Minneapolis.

And of course he talked to the musicians closest to Dylan, including Baez, Peter Yarrow, Jack Elliott, and Pete Seeger; to his manager, Albert Grossman; and to would-be Dylan producer Phil Spector, whom he interviewed during the sessions for "River Deep, Mountain High." So many of those witnesses are no longer with us: Dylan's parents, of course, but also John Hammond, Johnny Cash, Mary Travers, Allen Ginsberg, Dave van Ronk, Richard Fariña, and Phil Ochs have all passed away. Their testimony lives on, thanks to the assiduous work of Robert Shelton.

Despite such access and closeness, Shelton retained a journalist's objectivity, and his move to Europe was as much to put a distance between himself and those he was writing about as it was to escape what he saw as the ugliness of Nixon's America. To those who complained that Dylan remained elusive, [left] questions unanswered, Shelton would say that "it's all there, if you know how to break the code." Cries for blood were simply ignored. Bankruptcy was a constant anxiety but no amount of money would have persuaded him to "sell off the relics of a friend."

From the outset, Shelton was determined to establish Dylan as a major figure of twentieth-century culture whose work was discussed alongside that of Picasso, Chaplin, Welles and Brando. It's true that he can overstate the intellectual argument, but if some of the song analysis is overwritten, literary comparisons overwrought, we should remember that Shelton was making his case years before popular music in general, and Dylan in particular, became subjects of academic scrutiny. The times have, indeed, changed—and Shelton and his book helped to change them.

Certainly, Shelton could be difficult, firing off letters that should have remained forever unsent. But sometimes—often—he was difficult for the right reasons, because a principle was at stake. Sadly, he didn't live to see the revival of interest in the 1960s and its music, nor the return to form of the poet-singer-songwriter who defined the era. As he pointed out, Dylan "could have died in 1966, or after, and still have changed the face of popular music, and its metabolism."¹⁶ Neither did Shelton live to witness the reassessment of his study, which every Dylan chronicler since has drawn on and sometimes plundered. Increasingly regarded as a classic of the genre by a man who could be said to be the father of serious music journalism, *No Direction Home* is, as cultural historian Dr Lawrence J Epstein put it, "disorganized but fascinating, filled with wonderful anecdotes ... an authentic and valuable portrait for what it is, and what it is is a great book."

This new edition is, we believe, better edited and organized, with some twenty thousand words of authentic anecdote and detail restored from Shelton's 1977 manuscript. The most significant additions are to chapters one, four and ten, each one pivotal: Hibbing and Greenwich Village, and the celebrated 1966 interview *en route* from Lincoln to Denver. The Prelude is previously unpublished. Sections which have dated—bootlegs, the so-called New Dylans—have been excised. So, too, has much of the sketchy and unsatisfactory update: the book now ends in 1978, behind the scenes of the celebrated London concerts.

"Find something that you feel strongly about and just write it," Dylan advised Shelton as they enjoyed some downtime together in the Gaslight one evening in October 1965, four years after that life-changing *New York Times* review. It was advice the critic took to heart. Within a few weeks he had found his subject.

Elizabeth Thomson and Patrick Humphries
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incipient playwright; a film star; a painter; a Bible student; a voracious reader; a preacher; everybody's son, then everybody's father, many people's dream lover, and many people's "enemy."

If reporters asked him *who* or *what* he was, they'd invite his sarcasm. "I'm just a trapeze artist," he'd say, or a "rabbit-catcher and dog-smoother" or "an ashtray bender." Reporters often risked Dylan's scorn. "Does it take a lot of trouble to get your hair like that?" an Australian newsman dared to ask him. "No, you just have to sleep on it for about 20 years," Dylan parried. "What do you think about drugs?" a French reporter asked him. "Brigitte Bardot is the only good one I know." Dylan twitted one impatient reporter: "I'm just trying to answer your questions as good as you can ask them."

As early as 1964, he knew the dangers of defining his views, writing, sardonically: "do not create anything, it will be misinterpreted, it will not change. It will follow you the rest of your life." I think Dylan always wanted to keep his options open. In 1966 he said: "I define nothing. Not beauty, not patriotism. I take each thing as it is, without prior rules about what it should be." In 1976, he said he didn't "comprehend the values most people operate under ... I can't understand the values of definition and confinement. Definition destroys. Besides, there's nothing definite in this world." Despite his ambiguity, defiance and rhetorical flourishes, Dylan *has* defined and redefined himself often and unequivocally, but the definitions were always *subject to change*. Since the day I first met him in 1961, he has come closer to defining the shape, course, moral order and texture of our time than any artist I've encountered. His art and life trace his search for a workable existence as a creative iconoclast seeking his own answers. In 1964, in the notes to *Another Side Of*, he wrote:

*i know no answers an' no truth
for absolutely no soul alive
i will listen t' no one
who tells me morals
there are no morals
an' i dream a lot*

Yet by 1968, having written the Biblically-infused and moralistic *John Wesley Harding*, he was ready to say that "we are all moralists." Dylan's ability to change was an implicit critique of a rigid educational system that yields "useless and pointless knowledge." Defiantly, he dropped out of college, finding then that the universities and museums were among the institutions where "Lifelessness is the Great Enemy." But in the value-shifting Sixties, he became a hero to collegians and intellectuals. Some named him "Public Writer Number 1." By the beginning of the 1980s, Dylan, the self-taught writer-musician, had become a suitable subject for study. Princeton University gave him an honorary doctorate of music. A man who had long disdained "school," he was a tireless student, albeit a "roads scholar."

A basically quiet man, he's been blisteringly articulate. An international communicator, he has often been unable to communicate directly to those around him. As moods of dark and light colored his personality, silences alternated with pistol shots or geyser blasts of words. What sure aim he had in this line: "I'm helpless, like a rich man's child." His definition of "life, and life only" overflowed in word-flood:

*Pointed threats, they bluff with scorn
Suicide remarks are torn
From the fool's gold mouthpiece
The hollow horn plays wasted words
Proves to warn
That he not busy being born
Is busy dying.*

Using language elliptically, he wasted few words in writing about pity, terror, release, longing, vulnerability, liberation, responsibility, cages, traps, injustice. He was a quintessential writer of this period. His chief form was the song-lyric. He wrote, often with his extraordinary twist of black humor, about the arrogance of power and authority, utopianism and its deceptions, existential freedom and the modern apocalypse, the search for identity, commitment and lack of it, love and its many faces, and about all the false beliefs that hold us prisoner, the truths that can set us free. To counterpoint even his most somber

view of the modern wasteland, he could summon up hope for renewal and fulfillment. Always, he asked challenging questions. As he sang of *his* quest for answers and for new questions, *his* search for wholeness and for a sense of himself, the songs set the tempo for *our* own quests. We grew up, or stayed younger, with Dylan. Often misunderstood, he demanded to know: "how come you're so afraid of things that don't make any sense to you?" He knew a lot about fear: "experience teaches that silence terrifies people the most." He knew as well as Rimbaud ("I am the master of silence") how to master silence and turn it into a protective fence round wisdom.

As friend, reporter, critic and biographer, I was often able get behind that fence. Sometimes he provided the key, sometimes I found a door myself. It was marvelous when he'd really open up. Once he told me: "Everybody has something to do. I just can't believe that people are born and die without reason." He told me repeatedly how he hated labels: "I don't know what I am, truthfully speaking. When people believe that I am *this* or *that*, already there is a misunderstanding, a barrier, between them and me." He's said a lot to me down the years, but he also says a lot to people who've never met him, if they really *listen* to his songs.

However sardonically, Dylan stressed his role as entertainer, as "song and dance man." He deflated his role as teacher, yet he taught us much about love and loss, society's flaws and powers, alchemy and redemption, the border country between life and death. Dylan's career and work are metaphors and myths, card-games, street games and pantomimes, where everything operates on several levels. Like Jung, he was often astounded at the creativity that came out of him, as if he were just a vessel through which insight poured. Of his success he once said: "I'm there only because of time and chance. There are a million me's, all over the United States. And they are all hung up, but they cannot split from where they are."

Almost single-handedly, Dylan took poetry off dusty shelves and put it on the jukebox. Still, he was often uncomfortable at being labeled a "poet." He once exploded at me: "That's such a huge, God-damn word for someone to call themselves. 'A Poet!' I think a poet is anybody who wouldn't call himself a poet. When people started calling me a poet, it didn't make me any happier."

By disdaining the title "poet," he protected himself from those unaware of the grand tradition of folk and popular poetry, those who couldn't see the artistry in his borrowing and reshaping everyday speech, those who rejected the possibilities of a literature of the jukebox. Dylan began with the language of folksay, then he flowered into sophisticated city expression. His determined use of the syntax, vocabulary and rhythms of colloquial speech, his reliance on popular song-form, and his disavowal that he was a poet—all retarded his serious acceptance as a literary figure. Why is Dylan an extraordinary poet? I can call attention here to his concise and memorable formulations and aphorisms, his ability to say several things simultaneously, his audacious use of metaphor, simile and symbol, his evocative imagery, his cunning use of rhyme and near rhyme, of the sounds and colors of his words, the surprising contexts and combinations of felicitous phrases that touch and unsettle the listener, the musical bend and sway of his lines. For many, Dylan's art is an aural/oral expression that needs the nuance and emphasis of song. Yet once known, his lyrics come alive on the page, music resounding in the mind's ear.

As literary acceptance of Dylan grew, he winced less at being regarded as a romantic-visionary poet who'd made vast contributions to modernist poetics. When commentators saw him as a Whitman with a guitar or a Rimbaud with a recording contract, Dylan could stop pretending he didn't know the difference between a quatrain and a freight-train. Definitions of "literature" had to be expanded in new and exciting ways to encompass Dylan's art. It included his stage and page writing, his novel, *Tarantula*, his early "journalism," and his development of all forms of media as valid writer's vehicles. His duels with the press, his famed anti-interviews, were, in themselves, a form of literary performance.

Central to Dylan's nimbus of genius is his art of concealing art. He often gave the impression of being *only* the spontaneous, intuitive, automatic wordsmith, the casual minstrel. He sheltered the purposeful, highly conscious designs that weave throughout his work from the storm of critical overkill. He could not, however, conceal his talent to disturb, a talent that created envy among his peers even as he won their imitation. Because his indictments of social ills and human failings were so severe, his listeners felt guilt, and some were quick to strike back. He was called arrogant, manipulative, ambitious, paranoid and egotistical. He's frequently admitted that his sudden fame threw him, that he wished he hadn't said quite so many harsh things about associates. He often contended that his motives and meanings were distorted, producing an enemy for each convert. Like most self-made men he thought, I suspect, that he could do with a bit of tailoring. His history, I submit, doesn't need "tailoring" as much as it needs sympathetic understanding.

This romantic, angry, passionate, delightful and maddening man, who, many thought, could not maintain any close relationship for long, is, he freely admits, contradictory. Yet, there was no confusion about his compassion for the victims he recognized in all of us—victims of social lies, of deceptions, of manipulations in government, media, the music world. He heard apocalyptic voices and distant bells tolling in the storm:

*Tolling for the deaf an' blind, tolling for the mute ...
Tolling for the mistreated, mateless mother, the mistitled prostitute
For the misdemeanor outlaw, chased an' cheated by pursuit
An' we gazed upon the chime of freedom flashing*

As he matured, his catechism went beyond the simplistics of good and evil. He changed from activist critic to observer to evangelist. He sometimes played the part of visionary and of satanic jester who knew that life was tragic for those who felt too much and an absurdist comedy for those who think too much. His work oscillated between tears and laughter. He often lived to excess. Then, as moderate man he reveled in balance and order. As Blake wrote: "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom." Soon, he was back in emotional turmoil again, living to excess, refining it all into song. Ultimately his catechism was the absence of catechism. What he seemed most deeply to accept was the constancy of change itself. "There's nothing so stable as change," he said in 1964.

"No artist can accept reality," Nietzsche wrote. Dylan challenged the larger realities and his own. Because some of his own actualities were too mundane and literal for his romantic vision, he changed them a dozen times. Thinking mythically, he often lived mythically. Yet, here was a most vulnerable, sensitive writer who longed, repeatedly, for obscurity and its blessings, even though the other part of him needed to surpass, triumph and conquer. The two parts of his Gemini personality warred with each other. He tried to protect his inner core by becoming increasingly distant, elusive and unreachable. Yet he repeatedly bared his soul in song. We knew that even if he wrote about he, or she, or them, or it, or any of a large cast of characters, he was never far from himself, or the many selves that roared in debate inside him. In our minds, he became some of the characters he created. Who are the ragman, the lover, "Napoleon in rags," the armed orphan, the outlaw, the Jack of Hearts, the Drifter, the husband-brother of Isis, the joker and the thief? Who lurked behind the masks of Doctor Filth, Miss Lonely, Mrs Henry, the landlord, Achilles, the immigrant, Mr Tambourine Man? And what do the women-anima figures of Johanna, Maria, Ramona, Queen Jane, Mona, Valerie represent?

So here is a man as elusive as a Garbo or Brando simultaneously exposing to strangers his experiences, thoughts and feelings. He was there—visible and tangible; yet he was nowhere—spectral and hidden. The more the public clamored to know the inner Dylan, the less he revealed. Unless you could break the code to the revelations that lay behind the "Dylanese" of his poems and his talk, the veiled language which was opaque to the squares and carried secret messages to his "friends." He could use words as a screen. As Talleyrand said: "Man invented speech to conceal his thoughts." Dylan developed new forms of popular song in which both to reveal, and conceal, his thoughts. The lonely artist in America is a sad legend. Dylan is part not only of the old tradition that doomed Hart Crane and John Berryman, but he also pioneered a new tradition in which the poet could find larger audiences than ever. Some of his alienation was social, some was that of the writer who agonizes over the discrepancy between the way things are and the way they ought to be.

The power of Dylan's leadership, his stagecraft, the force of his personality and talent, the bardic stance and the self-perpetuating aura of legend—all this led some to try to deify him. Show business tends to elevate even shallow stars to the constellations. At the other extreme, from ancient times the bard was seen to have the potency of the priest, in touch with the gods. Dylan backed away from much of the power the public wanted to bestow upon him, although the temptations were great. Saint or sinner, he discarded the messianic clock and the devil's pitchfork and just sang: "Don't follow leaders."

Despite his efforts to shrug off "mystique" and "charisma," those words seemed coined for him. Those who felt Dylan's strong gravitational pull were often unable to describe his special magic. Some have found him "just very sexy." "Mystic force," others would say, or, "he seems to live out a lot of my dreams." With this gift, or curse, of magnetism, Dylan became one of the most influential artists of his time. If he

recorded a song one day, it was sung the next in Prague or Tel Aviv, discussed at Oxford, disputed at Antioch, imitated in Los Angeles, or copied in Nashville. Of course, the influence was centered in pop music. He made the topical-protest song "respectable." When he sired "folk rock" and other styles, the whole music world followed him. Groups named Blonde on Blonde, Judas Priest and Starry-Eyed and Laughing echoed his titles, characters. Critics, novelists and poets echoed Dylanisms in book titles such as *Something Happened*, *Hard Rain Falling*, *Busy Being Born*, *Outlaw Blues*, and *Gates of Eden*.

Dylan is typically ambivalent about his pre-eminence. "I never said I was the king. Others said that. The media said that, I didn't," Dylan told me while he was enjoying being off the throne. Yet his mid-1970s return to the stage and a gush of brilliant recordings put him right back on a throne he had only verbally abdicated. He knew if he acceded to his place on a pedestal, detractors would point to his feet of flesh. Beneath his many public faces, Dylan has always been an easy mark for critics. How effortless to deflate, lampoon, satirize and mock him. It became a vicious game of contradicting his "fables," rather than appreciating why he wove them. What fun they've had saying: "Even if he didn't always write great poetry, he always acted like a great poet." In those early years, his voice baffled those it didn't overwhelm. That affecting rugged singing voice was ridiculed, called "tubercular," like that of an animal in a trap. "It makes me think I'm not being heard," Dylan once said. Yet those who loved that distinctive voice felt it was the perfect vehicle for the anguish, wit and anger it articulated. (When he unexpectedly turned country crooner, fans demanded he return to rough, raspy singing again.)

Even granting his errors, excesses and contradictions, the case can be made for placing Dylan among important and innovative creative artists. Dylan arguably did for the popular song-form what Picasso did for the visual arts, Stravinsky for "serious" music, Chaplin for film, Joyce for the novel. Dylan lived up to the artist's greatest tasks—growth, exploration and change. Those unable to savor the heights to which he took popular song-poetry might regard such homage as a biographer's myopia or tunnel vision, a friend's hyperbole. Theirs is the loss.

Some Dylan detractors link his admirers with the groupies and shriekies of pop. There's been Dylanmania, of course, but his ranking must be assayed more seriously. Those who lionized him were not just star-struck "kids," but seasoned "cultured" commentators, as well. I was scoffed at in 1963 when I dubbed Dylan "the singing poet laureate of young America." Since then, a chorus of assent has grown steadily. John Clellon Holmes: "No one, years hence, will be able to understand just what it was like to live in this time without attending to what this astonishingly gifted young man has already achieved." Charles Reich saw Dylan in *The Greening of America* as "a true prophet of the new consciousness." John Peel regarded him as "the single most important force in maturing our popular music," Allen Ginsberg as "a space-age genius minstrel." The acceptance of Dylan as a literary voice has grown enormously. Professor Christopher Ricks: "A great amuser, a great entertainer, who belongs with the artists who've looked for the widest popular constituency, like Dickens and Shakespeare." Frank Kermode thought him "a virtuoso" with "no close rival." Dylan's work has been compared to Whitman, Yeats, Eliot, the Kabbalah and the Bible.

Conversely, some would argue that Dylan was a flawed genius, an unfinished musician, an erratic songwriter, a bewildered surrogate-messiah, an uneven performer. This book will try to show Dylan as a very human being, but equally an artist of transcendent historical importance. He is, I submit, a threshold-figure to our grasp of the contemporary fabric of American ideals and society. I see him as a new type of artist and entertainer, a new breed of superstar, a new species of poet remarrying speech and song. He is a new culture hero and anti-hero who tested the strengths, limits and failings of the several worlds through which he traveled. I find his self-education and quest that of an archetypal American Dreamer. He is an incarnation of the Young Man from the Provinces, who fought to gain recognition in the city. He is a born combatant, opposing everything that looks untrue, unfair or distorted to his vision. Embodying a little of all of us who have ever dreamed of influencing, changing and conquering, his journey became emblematic of the Sixties. Yet, we're still caught in the echo of songs he wrote decades ago. Dylan's "Hard Rain" is still falling on our thirsty deserts.

For all the lionization and emulation, for all the riches he earned, or spurned, Dylan has been mistreated often by the public and press. Joe Hill, the radical union singer, was executed while, fifty years later, Dylan sang his way to being a millionaire. "A lonely man with money is still a lonely man," Dylan once wrote. Must the American artist, even the vastly popular one, still be cursed with isolation,

lacking the fully aware audience he or she needs? Dylan made his voice heard, against all odds and critics, as he kept moving abrasively against the tides. He was luckier than Joe Hill, of course: luckier than those 18th-century Scots protest singers hanged for their defiance. Dylan fared better than poet-balladeer Wolf Biermann, forced into exile in November 1976 by East German communists who didn't like his dissident tune. Dylan prospered better than Prague rock stars put on trial for their anti-Big Brother independence. And, he's luckier than those "subversive" singer-poet-dissidents in the Soviet Union who faced jail or psychiatric hospital for their underground tapes. Yet, for all his wealth and honor, Dylan, surrounded by aides, buffers and myrmidons, was often denied the acceptance and respect his work deserved. For a lot of us, the time since 1960 will be etched in memory as "the age of Dylan." Many others still don't know who he is, what he signifies, except, perhaps, "that crazy hippie who sang 'Blowin' in the Wind.'"

We start, then, with a controversialist—just a songwriter and pop star to some, but the "hero with a thousand faces" to many others. Some wanted Dylan to be *Time's* "Man of the Year," *Rolling Stone* talked of "Dylan for President." Slowly, even grudgingly, the academy, the politicians and the media acknowledged Dylan's signature on these changed times. Dylan personifies the spirit of his period in the way Byron and Fitzgerald represented theirs.

There is scarcely a popular music form (blues, country, topical, folk-rock, ballad, prayer, even a waltz) Dylan didn't infuse with new possibilities. A master-politician as well as influencer, he befriended and affected the Beatles, Peter, Paul and Mary, Joan Baez, the Band, the Byrds, Johnny Cash, and a roster of singer-writers often referred to as "new Dylans." He wouldn't stand still, or lock himself into a single pander-to-the-audience style, so he was always losing admirers as he turned elsewhere and gained others. His 1960s work seemed to categorize itself into early, middle and late "periods," but he kept turning in new directions and soon there were many more "periods." He is still changing and growing, and proving just how much that change disturbs.

Dylan's life-style and death-style were so widely imitated that he became the precursor of nearly every major youth-culture trend for two decades. Often, the influence ran far beyond his command. A sub-industry in his bootleg tapes and records sprang up around the world. The self-destructing Weathermen took their name from his line: "You don't need a weather man/To know which way the wind blows." Demonstrators at the Chicago Democratic Convention in 1968 chanted, "The whole world is watching," a paraphrase of another Dylan line. Admen, copy editors, headline writers, columnists borrowed or adapted his lines and titles: "My Back Pages," "Bringing It All Back Home," "Visions of Johannesburg." Classified property ads in *The Times* of London were once sold under the heading "Subterranean Homesick Blues!"

Every cult figure stands on the shoulders of those who came before. Dylan, the great assimilator, amalgamated a legion of types and styles—Dean and Brando from the films, Woody Guthrie and a dozen ballad-makers and bluesmen and others from music. His image in our mind is connected to great and little mythic figures. He is the Alchemist brewing knowledge out of commonplace things. Changing form and style, changing his looks, changing his expression, Dylan is Osiris one day and Proteus the next. One moment he was the Magician from a Tarot pack, the next, Pierrot in whiteface singing "Life is pantomime." The style of it all was cool and mysterious, for to *explain* just what he was doing would violate the part left unsaid that we, the listener, had to complete. As Oscar Wilde wrote in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "He knew the precise psychological moment when to say nothing."

Dylan's rhythms, cadences and images have re-entered our everyday speech from which he refined them: He moved the carpet under us. We know Mister Jones as the arch-Philistine who's unaware that something is happening. Even though we're afraid we're stuck inside Desolation Row, we keep on keeping on. There may be blood on the tracks and nothing is revealed, yet he's told us there must be some way out of here. There's no direction home, but with one foot on the highway and the other in the grave, we try to get outside the empty cage. Desperation and hope fight in the captain's tower. Although it's all over now, we renew ourselves to leave the dead behind us. We're younger than that now. Death and re birth, endlessly with seven people dead, but "Somewhere in the distance/There's seven new people born." Dylan has so affected the loam of our speech, we can forget where his lines end and our own begin.

Even though he said he was not "in the teachin' business," he entered our "cavity minds" and demanded response and explanation. That was how it all began, in our old circle of friends in Greenwich Village when Bob got off the subway from America's heartland. We were all looking for answers, only

he asked the most probing questions. He knew the question itself might hold the answer. We turned to him—those younger and many older than he—for his vision, wit, fresh ideas, his daring to try what hadn't been tried. He "spit fast/with weapons of words/wrapped in tunes." We soon sensed what he meant when he said: "I am my words." Find your own answers, man, and you'll value them more, he said to us, man and woman, time and again. He wouldn't play guru, even when we insisted. He was too skinny to carry a cross, and too wary to let his manager carry it for him.

From 1961 on, Dylan spoke to us in riddles and paradoxes, epigrams and metaphors. Even when he spoke volubly, there was a sense of control over what he said. We often wondered about his long and palpable silences, as he watched with such intense focus that you sensed he was memorizing a scene and a conversation. He loved to make us laugh, at first, and then he seemed to love to mystify us. There was always that mixed sense of nearness and distance in which one Dylan was beside us and another was outside watching each drama unfold. He seemed, at first, aching to be recognized. "I was hungry and it was your world," he later wrote. What really impressed us most about him was that he wouldn't compromise. As a friend of his from Minneapolis later described those times: "It wasn't a question of selling out as much as it was a question of who was willing to buy." He not busy selling was busy buying—but Dylan fought concessions fiercely.

Often, he seemed to accept chaos, using its swirling energy to reshape his artist's sense of internal order. He moved so dizzily fast, we couldn't keep up with him. He seemed part of us and yet always detached, always elusive, sometimes even to himself. We envied his drive, yet we knew about the loneliness of the long-distance runner, and we didn't envy him that loneliness.

Then, from mid-summer of 1966 until late 1973, he stopped running. He built up to an incredible three-year onslaught of concert, film and recording activity. Then, he stopped running again. Each time, he'd outdistanced all the other runners. During the first hiatus, he did what he always said he'd wanted to do—sit with a big family in a big house and write. The second pause, that family life in disarray, he pondered his next moves. The pauses gave me a chance to catch up, to assimilate his achievements. Dylan troubled us, haunted us like a lost part of ourselves. Whether in action or repose, in front of me or distanced, Dylan astonished me with his sense of intense life, and astonished me further by not burning himself out. He cheated the undertaker. On the way to the cemetery, he got out of the hearse and hitchhiked back home. We saw him dying young, like poets and stars are "supposed" to do. He beat the rap, a writer who decided he'd rather be read than dead.

Where can I begin his story? I'd need a movie camera to show the flashing chains of visual images: Dylan at Chicago starting Tour '74 to a thunderclap ovation? Or at London's Albert Hall and Paris's Olympia in May, 1966, resisting audience hostility to his new music? Dylan's playing to 250,000 at Blackbushe, England in 1978, or way back at Folk City in 1961, in his black Huck Finn corduroy cap, galvanizing us with his intense singing, his jokey stage games? Or shall I begin with him sitting near Jack Kerouac's grave in 1976, improvising a tribute to one of the writers who opened new roads to him? A turban-headed image on national TV, in 1976, looking oppressed and singing oppression? Jamming on Sunday afternoons in his home town, Hibbing, with a scruffy rock band? Tumbling through the New Orleans Mardi Gras madness, demanding to know why blacks can't drink in white bars? Delighting or shocking the audiences at the Newport Folk Festivals? Contemplating a house that wasn't a home on the Pacific Coast, or strumming his guitar on the streets of Woodstock? A magnetic performer in so many settings, his whole life seemed a performance. Perhaps the camera should focus first on a 1966 college pad where raggy students sprawl, turning on to *Blonde on Blonde*. Or, ten years later, those students now respectable middle-class parents, playing *Desire* for the first time?

Or, do I begin at the midpoint, with the turbulent 1960s behind him and the unexplored 1970s still ahead? About a decade after I'd befriended him, he came to visit me at the Henry Hudson Hotel on Manhattan's West Side. I hadn't seen him since he appeared at the Isle of Wight Festival eighteen months earlier. I'd been living in England, sifting and assembling the facts and the truths-behind-facts of his career. I'd been seeking absolute truth, though I knew relative truth was the best I could hope for. I wanted to unlock the door of his creative mysteries. I told him that he held the key but didn't own the lock. He is often not his best explicator. He had written his masterpieces, told his turbulent tale piecemeal in songs, poems, interviews and arguments. I wanted to piece it together partly because I thought he was

a far more remarkable character than any novelist could invent. I had interviewed scores of people who thought they knew him. Virtually no one had told me: "I know what he is all about." Usually, they said they knew only a part of the picture, and they would give me a jagged piece of experience, insight or anecdote to fit into the mosaic. Nearly everyone I interviewed had as many questions for me as I had for them, including his parents and brother. I had felt like the reporter in *Citizen Kane*, looking for Rosebud. But there were *dozens* of Rosebuds.

As he came up the hotel corridor, he looked different again—very healthy, with even a bit of color in his cheeks. Fringe beard, heavy workman country boots, cord slacks, an old country undershirt peeking out beneath his leather jacket. Would the meeting be an anti-climax, I wondered, or would it be like all the other times—a few jokes, sense of imminent drama, a dash of mystery, a flash of anger? No man is a hero to his biographer, nor is he an anti-hero, either. Why did this man I knew so well always intrigue me? After all, he was off-stage now; why should I be keyed up as if the curtains were parting? How would he be today—mercurial, chimerical, tense or gamey? Which of his many pseudonyms would he be wearing—Elmer Johnson, Tedham Porterhouse, Bob Landy, Robert Milkwood Thomas, Big Joe's Buddy, Blind Boy Grunt, Keef Laundry or Judge Magney? After Princeton, Dr Bob Dylan? "How're you doin'?" I asked, and he said with a warm smile as we shook hands, "Oh, gettin' along, I guess."

Bob entered my room and began a minute examination of every detail of it. "The things that must have gone on in this room," he remarked, as if he'd never been in a dingy hotel before. A piece of wall plaster was missing. He tried to guess whether a whiskey bottle or an ashtray might have been thrown in some lovers' quarrel years ago. Bob had repose written all over his face. I recalled his brother's remark: "He was like a fifty-year-old man. So calm, so peaceful and so dignified." He looked like *New Morning* that morning.

We compared experiences about where we were living. "Woodstock turned into a bad joke. Why, they were running tours up there. There were people up there trying to pick up a piece of the earth, a piece of the lawn or of the shrubs." His "Eden" had turned into a zoo, he made that clear. Why had he returned to the Village? "I'll be able to let you know about that better after we're not living in the Village anymore. We're just passing through. A lot of time, you just have to go down many roads to get where you are going. The important thing is to keep moving. Or else to stop by the side of the road every once in a while and build a house. I guess that's about the best thing anyone can do." Was it a question of finding some place to hide from the notoriety and fame? "No," Bob replied, "I really don't want to hide from anything." The speaking voice was so calm, its tempo matching the serenity of his mood. But soon he was telling me he was embattled again.

One self-styled "Dylanologist" had been systematically plundering his garbage pail for "clues" to the "real Dylan." "Yes, it's true," Bob said with a sigh. "I guess that's just part of the price of fame. We all kept loading up the garbage pail with mouse traps, then all the dog-shit we could find, but he kept going through the garbage, anyway." Not every superstar had to pay *that* price of fame. Why was he still so worshipped or castigated? "The media created the trouble for me. They blew me out of proportion. My thing was just for a crowd of people who were on the same wavelength that I was on. What I was doing wasn't really for a mass audience. The mass audience was all shuck, all hype. I'm not a Shea Stadium type of performer, I never was. The slogan that was going around was 'the Beatles, Dylan, and the Stones were the kings.' I never said that. I never called myself the king, or anything like it. The promotion men did all that. The media did all that. I never rejected the title of 'king' because I never accepted it in the first place." That's how it looked to him then, before he was ready to go back into the market-place with Tour '74. If he wanted to blame the media, which he could play like a harp, one just listened.

I told him how depressing it was, after he'd stamped intelligence on to pop music, that there was still such a lot of trivia being hawked. How could top-40 radio continue with such poor quality when he had actually changed the face of pop music? Dylan replied: "Changing the face of pop music is not necessarily changing its metabolism. I didn't change the metabolism. All I did was just open up a whole lot of doors. But, you have to admit, the influence—*my* influence—is there, all over, even in country music. Now you can hear the street sound in pop music almost anywhere. The influence is there."

We talked about some old mutual friends we didn't see much anymore. Bob could be nostalgic about those old times, then, and he would, later try to bring it all back home with the Rolling Thunder Revue. "Those were wonderful days, all right. It was a movement then, a *real* movement. But it was probably the last movement. Say," he exclaimed, "that would make a good song title wouldn't it?" Bob resumed, sadly:

"The dream is gone. That feeling is gone now. It's meaningless to try to grasp what's passed. I see no similarity between what the people are trying to do today and what happened in the early 1960s. Those early days in the Village were great, and the days in Dinkytown were even greater. Now, things are depressing. The Village is depressing. Neon and cheapness. Today, it seems as if thousands of years of experience are being compressed into a year. What is going on now doesn't surprise me. Do you see the sort of books and records and junk they are rushing out every day? It's unbelievable."

Couldn't he find any encouragement in the activities of the New Left? "The New Left has no policy, no program no philosophy, really, when you come right down to it. There really isn't a New Left. Those people who march for peace are just interested in peace, but that doesn't make them part of any New Left. It is not like the Old Left, or what we had in the early years. The Old Left had a program and a policy and a place, and things like that. The Old Left had some reason behind it. When you come right down to it, there is no youth culture, and there is no New Left, and, as far as the music business is concerned, it's just a toy, nothing but a toy."

The words seemed cynical, but his tone wasn't. It was his quiet estimation of the situation, at that moment. I asked him what he'd been reading lately. It was the sort of question he wouldn't have answered when he arrived in New York, when he was devouring everything he could lay his eyes upon. Even in the late 1960s, when he kept a large open Bible on a reading stand in Woodstock, he would have thought it pretentious to tell anyone. (In early 1977, the *Times Literary Supplement* asked Dylan, among a roster of literary heavies, which he regarded as the most under-rated and over-rated books of the century. To both questions he puckishly answered: "The Bible.")

Bob told me: "It's a very heavy responsibility for me to say what it is I'm reading, because too many people would regard that as some kind of endorsement. Some of them would run right out and start reading the same thing and I don't want to do that. That happened once when I said I was interested in the *I Ching*." He relented, and told me he was reading novels by Isaac Bashevis Singer and Chaim Potok. "They make a lot more sense to me these days than all that Maharishi stuff or the Indian mystic thing." Bob was about to go on a private visit to Israel but, again, beyond his command, it was to be publicized out of shape "I went to a Hasid wedding last week," he told me, weighing, I thought, my reaction. "The Jewish thing in this city is becoming very heavy," he said.

Bob knew I'd spent years contacting old friends of his to piece together a comprehensive biography. I told him I'd finally tracked down a good Hibbing friend, John Bucklen. Bob smiled. "Where in the hell did you find him?" I told him he was a disk jockey in Wisconsin. "John was really my buddy, my best buddy." He regretted that when he'd last seen Bucklen "I was terribly rushed, terribly busy. I went back to Hibbing for the class reunion." That tenth anniversary of high-school graduation had been a moment of elation. He continued: "When I was 15, I said to myself: 'They treat me pretty low down here now, but I'll be back one day and then they'll all run up to shake my hand.' It's true, that I said that to myself. I said: 'I'm gonna come back here and have people look up to me.' I made that deal with myself. And it actually came true, in the summer of 1969. I sat there in Hibbing and signed autographs for an hour, more than an hour ... Yes, Echo was there, too. You've seen Hibbing," Bob continued. "You've seen that great ugly hole in the ground, where that open-pit mine was. They actually think, up there, that it's beautiful. They think it is a scenery place. Well, they are doing that now to the whole country. I didn't really look at Hibbing, when I went back. I just went for the graduation party. I don't need to be reminded of what it was like. I'll never forget it." His face was impassive, but a shudder seemed to run through him. It reminded me of his book *Tarantula*, where he said he'd make a Faustian pact with the devil to get away from the wasteland vacuum of Middle America. "I'm sick of cavity," he wrote, and the big hole in the ground in Hibbing was a metaphor for all the sickening cavities he saw around him.

We talked about his recordings. I told him that I often regretted that journalism pressurized me to analyze some of his albums before I'd lived with them. We came to *Self Portrait* and his eyes narrowed as they always used to when he thought he was on the defensive. I told him I'd have to listen to that controversial album again. Dylan was embattled then, and since, by bootleggers, scavengers and by the writers he didn't know or respect who'd threatened their way into his life. Bob clearly was ambivalent about the honors some had shown him, but he disdained the sales-mill approach toward instant popular culture, the grinding out of posters, bootleg tapes, pseudo-biographies, magazine pieces, ill-considered reviews. It was an old wound to him. I remember his lines from "11 Outlined Epitaphs" of 1964:

*I don't like t' be stuck in print
starin' out at cavity minds
who gobble chocolate candy bars
quite content an' satisfied
their day complete
at seein' what I eat for breakfast
the kinds of clothes I like t' wear
an' the hobbies that I like t' do*

I tried to assure Dylan that I could end up with a portrait in which he could retain dignity and respect as an artist. He had known me long enough, I hoped, not to bracket me with the reporters who think denuding celebrities is a respectable way of earning a living. Dylan suggested some people I might try tracking down, such as Philip Saville, an English TV director with whom he had once worked. A name or two from Minneapolis came up and I asked how they might be helpful. Bob smiled and said: "It's just a clue."

Did he want to comment on the question of drugs? "What sort of drugs?" he riposted. "I never had anything to do with glamorizing the drug thing. That was the Beat thing, not me. As for the hard drugs, that's a question of trafficking. It goes on, and it's a bad scene. But you have to realize that junk is not the problem in and of itself. Junk is the symptom, not the problem, as Dr Freud would say." Could he accept the portrait of himself in the film *Don't Look Back*, which had long discomfited him? "Oh, I saw it about a year or so ago. I have more perspective on it now, and I'm less upset about it than I was. I can say that I almost like it now."

All this mellowness from the angriest of angry young men was surprising. In the early years in New York he'd started out charming, then gradually became tenser, warier and more difficult. But here was the moderate man about, finally, to sever his links with his long-time manager, Albert Grossman. "He had me signed up for ten years, for part of my records, for part of my everything. But I'll be out of that next month. I finally had to sue him. I got me a lawyer and was going to sue him, but Albert wanted it quiet and, because of that, he settled out of court. A lot of people would go out of their way to run Albert down, but I wouldn't." (Dylan never used his considerable media power to vent his problems with Grossman, or Columbia Records, or the song publishers who held vital Dylan copyrights until 1965. A sense of dignity, perhaps a remnant of loyalty, then and since, kept Dylan from using his weapon of words here. Perhaps just holding that deterrent weapon enabled him to free himself from the chains and fetters of a contract that had run from obscurity to eternity.) Bob went on to tell me that a lot of deals he'd made with Grossman, such as his first song-publishing contract, had proved better for Grossman than himself. It had all been sticky, a five-year on-and-off divorce that had been painful to both parties. After his exhausting 1965–66 world tour, Grossman had scheduled more than sixty concerts for him.

Dylan was one of the few contemporary artists of the era who had shifted partial control in the music business away from the fat cats to the artists themselves. He had often told me of troubles he'd had with the businessmen, the record company executives, agents, box-office people. He called his own tune as soon as he was strong enough to do so. What sort of a hostile world was this for a *poet* to be working in? He needed a shield. When things were going well with his manager, Bob lauded him to the skies, but even now he held back in attacking Albert, beyond saying: "Albert's got terrible taste—and you can quote that." He was apparently referring to how Albert was citifying Woodstock-Bearsville with a posh restaurant in a farmhouse, and a recording studio. "A country farmhouse!" Bob exclaimed. "It's all unbelievable!" (As early as 1963, he'd written a warning to his fellow Broadside singers to be wary of the unseen "buyers and sellers" who play both sides against the other, with the artist in the middle.)

He had his complaints, yet he wasn't vengeful. Even for him, there's a limit to challenging authority before losing some of the power that authority held. The international music business is a colossus, and Dylan had to put a saddle on it to ride it. He knew its rewards, defeats, and hypocrisies. He worked within "the business," but tried to keep some detachment. How successful was he? He had no fan club, he didn't endorse products, he turned his back on several fortunes during his retreats. He'd seen, in the Sixties, the American recording industry grow from an annual gross on pop records of \$250,000,000 to more than a billion dollars a year. After that decade, Dylan was ready to characterize the music business to me as "a toy, a game."

We both knew he'd been rudely ignored by Folkways, Vanguard and Elektra before he was signed to Columbia Records by a producer who hadn't even heard him sing! It's an old story, how Presley and the Beatles and Dylan were all shunned or laughed at within the record industry until they tamed the beast. The cruelty of show business is a platitude, but when people of the stature of Dylan and the Beatles wrangled with the businessmen, it was hard for the man-in-the-street to sympathize with them.

Could the music fan sympathize better with the hundreds, or thousands, of those who've been broken on the wheel of show business? One industry leader, who asked not to be named, defended to me the way the business operated. He cited the great competition, the high elements of risk. With Dylan, I share some angers at the way the business works. It is a litany of harsh facts. We can understand Dylan best if we watch how he dueled with that world, to his gain, and to his pain.

Bob and I talked on for hours. If I probed too close to the bone, he stood up, looked out the window, as if leaving. If I released the pressure of questions, he sat down again. Sometimes he spoke in aphorisms: "There's no place to go. There are guys in prison that just can't afford to get out." We joked about how he was never the most organized person in retaining his own mementoes. "I used to write songs on napkins, just like Woody did, and then I used the napkins to wipe my mouth with," he recalled, smiling.

"I was doing new things in 1959. I was pretty raggy then, but I was doing things that haven't been heard since. Listen to my records before 1965, and you won't hear anything that sounds like that." Did songs still flow out as quickly? "A few years ago, when I was in the very heart of it all, I would write a song in two hours, or maybe two days, at the most. Now, it can be two weeks, maybe longer." (A few weeks later, I saw one of those stories about Dylan at a studio session in which he reportedly wrote a song in 25 minutes!)

I tried to sound him out about social action but, at that point, the angry fires seemed banked. We agreed that America was in trouble again, that the masters of war were still in power. Bob made no comment then about how, or if, he might get back on the barricades again. Yet, when he said to me "they're not going to get away with it," there was much steely resolve in his voice. I knew it was only matter of time until he picked up his cudgels against "them."

Bob was keen to look at the basement swimming pool. We drifted downstairs and stood beside the pool a few minutes and his eyes opened wide and glowed an iridescent blue. "Are there a lot of pools like this in town?" he asked, as if I were some authority on Manhattan swimming. I'll have to find me something like that." We chatted our way out to his new lime-green station wagon. We passed a few people along West 57th Street, but no one took any notice of him.

Dylan and his wife were to fly to Israel in two days. I was to stay on in New York to refresh memories of Greenwich Village and Woodstock. I was living in the past then, turning the time back to those great days of the early Sixties. "Folk City is just a parking lot now," Bob had told me, and there at the corner it was, just torn down and paved over. Mike Porco had moved the club to Third Street. I walked past Dylan's old apartment on West Fourth Street, across the street from the Hip Bagel, then inched my way along to his new place down the road. Sara Dylan, behind sunglasses, was just coming out the doorway, furtively looking both ways, wrapped in a raincoat, taking her little white dog for a walk. New York wasn't even fit for dogs, I thought. There wasn't any room to breathe. Bleecker Street was slummier than ever—tired, dirty, sad cafés. Pizza shops and espresso joints still thrived, but it had all slid downhill. Bob wasn't really going to try to infuse the village with that old spirit until the summer of 1975. For the moment, I was looking back to 1960. The New York in which Dylan had arrived late that year was the concrete jungle of vitality and struggle it'd always been—a lure to all the young men and women of the provinces who'd used up the sparse resources of their home towns.

1960: that's another point where the story begins.

There had seemed so much hope back in 1960. John F Kennedy had won the Presidency by a hair's-breadth from Nixon. Floyd Patterson was the boxing champion of the world. The daytime soap opera, *The Romance of Helen Trent*, went down the drain, after twenty-seven sudsy years. In the South, 1960 was the start of the integration sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina. The pilot of an American U-2 reconnaissance plane was shot down by the Russians. Castro was consolidating the Cuban revolution. The Cold War, which looked as if it might start thawing, froze over again.

Americans were reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Born Free*, and *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. Many were getting ready to celebrate the Civil War centennial. Broadway hits included *A Taste of Honey* and

Bye Bye Birdie. Elvis made another dreary film, *GI Blues*, while Paul Newman was emerging as a new screen cult figure. Hitchcock scared the hell out of us with *Psycho*, while a benign Frank Sinatra starred in *Can-Can*. Oscar Hammerstein II, lyricist of *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*, died at 65. Emily Post died at 86, and American manners never quite survived the shock. *Never on Sunday* was an international film and song hit. Hank Ballard's "The Twist" was about to be turned into a dance craze by Chubby Checker. The biggest excitement in popular music was coming from folk music, a revival that was to set the tempo for the early Sixties.

In 1960, America stood poised with a young man in the White House we hoped was an idealist. We tried to believe "the New Frontier" was more than a slogan. Before the Cuban Missile Crisis and before assassins' bullets and Vietnam turned all that promise into sorrow, it was a great time to be young and starting out. Before Martin Luther King's passive resistance ran into a stone wall, it was even a time to be black and young and hopeful.

1960 was: after Joe McCarthy, before Eugene McCarthy. After the Beats, before the hippies. After the Old Left, before the New Left. After Campbell's Soup, before Andy Warhol. After dada, before camp. After Batman, before the return of Batman. After the *Village Voice*, before the *East Village Other*. After Marshall Field, before Marshall McLuhan. After Trotsky, before Yippie.

1960 was: post-Thomas Wolfe, ante-Tom Wolfe. Post-Presley, ante-Beatles. After Bill Mauldin, before Jules Feiffer. After tea, before pot. After the Lindy, before the Twist. After apathy, before cool. After the Angry Young Men, before the protest singers. After the Red Cross, before the Red Guard. After Billy Graham, before Bill Graham. After momism, before popism. After the Establishment, before street people.

1960 was a time of promise. For a garland of reasons, world youth was beginning to breathe and stir after the silence and apathy of the Fifties. Pope John XXIII was budging the Church into the twentieth century. Castro and Guevara were trying to bring color back to a revolution that had turned bureaucratic and stifling. The Kennedy "Camelot" was bringing some youth, culture and style to a Babbitized Washington.

1960 was before Bob Dylan got to New York town.

Note: Originally written in 1977 as Chapter 1, this Prelude was revised in 1980, as Shelton was working on what he hoped would be the final pre-publication edit. At that point, it was repurposed as Chapter 2, following what remains the opening chapter of the book, about growing up in Hibbing. The plan then was to follow it with the 1966 interview undertaken as Shelton and Dylan flew from Lincoln, Nebraska to Denver Colorado—a cinematic opening of flashbacks and flash-forwards, as the author suggests in the foregoing text. Shelton was then persuaded that such an approach risked confusing the reader of what was already a complicated book and it was agreed that the text worked best as a Prelude. In the event, faced with an already over-long book, his then publishers insisted it was cut. Hence the much briefer Prelude, "Lifelessness, the Enemy," to the 1986 edition. It is restored to its rightful place here, Shelton's final intentions respected.

