

D022.a 'T'WAS IN ANOTHER LIFETIME ...

In March 1963, in New York, the Westinghouse Broadcasting Company (now CBS) taped two hour-long specials, written and introduced by John Henry Faulk, on the theme of The History Of America Through Folk Music. Both programmes went out the following May with, among the roster of performers on the second of them a young and relatively unknown Bob Dylan. Hindsight might prompt us to ask why the mighty D would choose to rub shoulders with the likes of Hester, Dane and The Brothers Four. Truth is, though, back in March 1963 he'd surely have been grateful for the opportunity for, still as yet but on the cusp of greatness, the CV here least likely to impress was his. Though it might be hard to credit after seeing their anodyne, glee club, style-over-substance treatment of two Guthrie songs plus others (and you can't help but wonder what Bob, looking on, must have thought of them), The Brothers Four (not real brothers but merely members of the same college frat-house) had scored between '61 and '63 two top twenty albums and a top five single and had performed at the 1961 Academy Awards. 35 year old Barbara Dane ("Bessie Smith in stereo"), meanwhile, had established a solid reputation for herself on the jazz and blues circuit, Carolyn Hester had released three albums, on the last of which (produced by John Hammond) a then unrecorded Bob had blown guest harmonica and The Staples Singers were already ten years down the road of a long and increasingly successful gospel / folk career (indeed, all - though Hester less actively than the rest - would continue to perform regularly through to the last years of the century and, in Bob's case, of course, beyond).



With Langhorne, Hester, Lee, Sept 1961

D022.a is tremendous, both in its own right and as a document of great historical importance, placing pupescent (never mind the spell-checker) D as it does foursquare in his pre-fame milieu. Though this was not his first TV appearance (he'd filmed *Madhouse On Castle Street* in London a few weeks before and, according to Shelton and others, also appeared on local Midwestern TV with The Satin Tones as early as 1959) it *is* his first filmed performance to survive. And though it might seem odd that a programme themed on history in song should start with one less than twelve months old, so it is and so it does - possibly in recognition of Wind's debt (readily acknowledged by its author) to the Negro spiritual No More Auction Block, or maybe just because the song managed to sound (not the last time he'd pull this trick) so much older than it really then was. Either way, Wind, like its singer, would soon attract a degree of celebrity way in excess of what anyone watching this original performance is likely to have thought possible. But savvy Svengali Albert Grossman was a master manipulator who contrived to place D's song (courtesy of Peter, Paul and Mary) at the top of the charts very soon after this programme's first airing, which also just happened to coincide with the release in its final form (opening track Blowin' In The Wind) of *Freewheelin'*. Triple serendipity, doors open, the future beckons. Of course Bob's talent more than anything else bowled him headlong down the road he's travelled since, but the story of his first faltering steps is less straightforward than might at first glance appear.*



John Henry Faulk (1913-1990)

Faulk's faux cornball narration (the Civil War - *a hartbraykin' fraykus*) runs through the programme and serves together with the grainy monochrome and whimsically basic production values to better engender the spirit of the age - and it does feel, with its strange mix of innocence and veneer, like an altogether bygone age. If I (clearly no talent scout) had to put my money on just one of these acts to make it big, it would be the Staples, who best come across as the real thing. Hester is pretty and talented, though lacks gravel, that edge of Baez steel, is a bit too school-ma'amish (though her Famine Song is fine), Dane fails to impress and the Bros are very grim (that's to say *bland*); are all that Bob is not. Their clothes - matching short-sleeved button-down shirts and cravats - are smart, Bob's are plain; his hair is tidy, theirs is *barbered*. The unclipped ends of his strings fly harum-scarum from the head of his guitar - you can bet all theirs were snipped off neat and trim. All perfectly nice guys, I'm prepared to believe, but you can sense their boat a-sailin' even as you watch.



Barbara Dane, Newport 1965



The Brothers Four

And just as you wonder what Bob thought of their Guthrie renditions, it's interesting to speculate what they too must have thought in seeing and hearing (indeed, *backing*) his arrestingly powerful Hollis Brown. Really he was too young, had lived too short a life to have written such a desperate song. How far back must you go to find someone as good so young? Mozart probably, though you might be able to think of others. He sings both Wind and Constant Sorrow with his head thrown way back, partly due to the harp-rack (don't you miss that nowadays?) and partly, I presume, because there was a boom mike overhead for him to sing to - and that's Bob, even then - the performance is all. Provided that scores, the rest can go hang. Mind, he's photogenic as ever (screenshot below), candy-cute enough, I suspect, even for that picky pair CatBlack and Camilo.

The meanders of fortune are strange, arbitrary and often seem cruel (though the propensity of things to work out for the best is remarkable). For instance, the then blonde Barbara Dane was allegedly Grossman's first choice for the "Mary" role in PP&M (it is also said he considered Hester too) - but would Wind (and its author) have swept around the world with quite the same unstoppable force if not for the striking Nordic beauty and earnest teen appeal of Mary Travers (as of 2009, sadly passed away)? As for The Brothers Four, after a '64 / 5 career dip, the group attempted a comeback by recording a highly commercial version of Mr Tambourine Man but were prevented from releasing it by licensing issues. Before these could be resolved, The Byrds stepped in and jingle-jangled off into history, dragging Bob's name behind them and leaving the Bros to rue, in miffed and querulous chagrin, no doubt, the unfathomable foibles of fate.



HVALA LH

STARS Essential. Five.

* This review originally included a URL link to the article (publication date 30 November 2007) below. Given the fallibility of such links, I have reproduced the article in full without the author's permission. No offence intended.

The Ballad Of Bobby And Albert by R.E. Prindle

For some reason the notion has grown that Folk Music erupted in 1958 with the Kingston Trio's version of Tom Dooley. I don't understand this. We sang Folk and Old Timey all the way through grade school. Grade school ended for me in 1950. Folk music was always a conscious part of my life. I grew so tired of singing *Go Tell Aunt Rhody* and *She'll Be Comin' Round The Mountain* that I shouted for joy upon hearing The Weavers sing *On Top Of Old Smokey* and *Goodnight Irene*.

That was in the days of *Your Hit Parade*. That show was a key program before TV wiped programmed radio off the Networks. They thought radio was dead. Didn't think anyone would listen to music twenty-four hours a day. We not only did that but we listened to the same four songs over and over in fifteen minute segments. They called it Top Forty but I remember it more like the Top Four. When one song wore out they plugged in another one and kept going. Of course that was only temporary; things evolved fast.

Folk and folk related music was a strong stream all through the fifties. Burl Ives was the rage for a while but you can only get so far on *Jimmie Crack Corn And I Don't Care* and *The Blue Tail Fly*. Tennessee Ernie Ford and his Sixteen Tons was as close as you could get to Folk without actually stepping over the line. Harry Belafonte occupied the mid-fifties as a Folksinger, academic quality, with his stupid *Mark Twain*. In a more pop vein Mitch Miller churned out stuff like *She Wore A Yellow Ribbon* and *The Bowery Grenadiers*. I didn't care for it at the time but his singalong stuff is pretty good.



[Lonnie Donegan](#)

Who can forget Lonnie Donegan, greatest of them all, with his fabulous hit tune *The Rock Island Line* in 1955. The song was played once every fifteen minutes around the clock on every station for a couple of weeks. I once artfully shifted stations so that I got to hear the song seven times in a row. Lonnie Donegan could sing circles around the entire Greenwich Village crowd including any number of Dylans. He was very successful in combining a listenable approach to a trad style. All the trad stuff done trad style was OK for the enthusiasts but it had no commercial potential. None of the Greenwich Village crowd had a future except Dylan. Even the best of them, Fred Neil, fell flat.

Fred Hellerman of The Weavers was musical advisor to The Kingstons who merely continued the Weavers' tradition. The music that Bob Dylan tuned into in 1959 had been an established fact for ten years or better. His future manager Albert Grossman had established premier folk venue The Gate Of Horn in Chicago the year before while helping to establish the Newport Folk Festival in 1959.

The trad folk types were running the Village by the time Dylan got there. Some people liked the traditional style - they usually smoked pipes. I can handle it but I don't like those precious antiquarian stylists; I much prefer the pop styles of The Kingstons and The Chad Mitchell Trio. Did you ever listen to Terry Gilkyson and the Easy Riders? Pozo Seco Singers?

It didn't take Dylan long to understand that the way to success was through the pop style rather than the trad. Thus Dylan as a folk act can be classed with The Kingstons, The Mitchell Trio and The New Christy Minstrels.

His muse, however, spoke with a purer voice; the muse belonged to him, he said, or at least she shackled with him for a couple years before moving on. As talented as Dylan was in those years he did not make it alone. As he said, he wanted to sing to people on his own wavelength. That was a small audience.

While he was shifting the dial to the high numbers at the right hand side of the band he passed through the broad band. In order to get to his own audience he had to appeal to a broader cross section; so he wrote stuff like *Blowin' In The Wind*.

As someone who was there at the time I had to roll my eyes at the song's obviousness while Bob's vocals drove me up the wall. The sales figures for the first three or four albums bear me out.



[The Manager](#)

So how did Bob get from there to superstar? Two words - Albert Grossman. This article could be subtitled *The Genius And The Promoter*. For that brief one or two year period Bob turned out generalized songs that caught the spirit of the g-g-generation. It is questionable how far the songs would have gone had not the promotional genius of Albert Grossman seized the main chance.

Grossman would be as fascinating a study as Bobby. While Dylan has gotten all the credit, his early career was in fact a fifty-fifty partnership with Albert. Bob had no business sense, still doesn't; nor should any artist be expected to. Everyone would have stolen him blind. It's the music business. The performers about him either professed to reject financial success because they couldn't find the handle or may have been so purist that they actually despised the money. Sorta hard to believe but that's the way they talked.

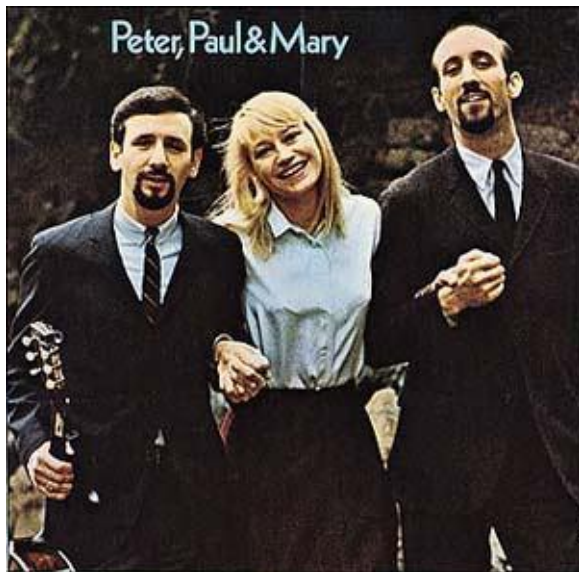
Now, Albert not only saw the financial potential of the caterwauling Dylan but more importantly he foresaw that phonographs records would be the medium of expression for the entire generation. Records were how the generation would communicate.

Rather than looking back at what the recording industry had been, he looked forward to what it would be. Noting the song-writing potential of the 1962-63 Dylan, he determined to make Bob the keystone of his grab for the golden ring. He succeeded in capturing Bob. He had his keystone but he lacked the supports - but he'd already thought that out, working at it from the time he founded The Gate Of Horn. Having gotten himself a fecund folk-style songwriter he now needed a sweet singing Top 40 folk style group a la Kingston Trio. The latter was perhaps the easiest part of the equation.

Secure in his source of material, Albert assembled a commercial-sounding folk group called Peter, Paul and Mary, three former purists who opted for the cash. Packaging a sound for his

group was relatively easy - he had the songs of his keystone set to pretty three part harmonies. *Presto!* Albert had dumped the harsh cacophony of Dylan and the songs shone.

Parts one and two of his plan were complete. He had partnered himself with Dylan and owned Peter, Paul and Mary. The rest fell into place. Entranced by the songs of Bob Dylan, the public now wanted to know who the writer was. Essentially the singer-songwriter was called into existence by demand. Albert put his publicity act in motion. It is doubtful that he knew how Dylan would respond, but Dylan's *mysterioso* act was perfect for the times while being executed to perfection. Albert's keystone captured the imagination of the world.



As a genius promoter, Albert understood his contribution to the equation. Albert engineered Bobby's success while, with an artist's ego, Dylan totally underestimated Albert's contribution. Nevertheless Albert Grossman wanted his fair share which he calculated as much higher than the established ten per cent for perfunctory management while probably going over the line of "fair", which a promoter's ego will.

The structure of the contemporary music business was in its formative stages. Albert was a presage of the future. He formed groups with an identity in which he took only fifty per cent, but since the groups were his creation he was entitled to it. Later the artists would simply be put on salary. By the end of the century, when the music industry had evolved, his successors conceived a group concept from start to finish, providing concept and songs while merely hiring some musical working stiffs, probably not all that musical, just stiffs. The performers were interchangeable like members of a sports team. Heck, they didn't even play or sing they just danced to records. It didn't matter whether one or more of the group was replaced or even all of them, for the performers had no talent, merely acrobatic skills. Promotion had evolved since Albert.

Albert understood the artistic ego but too well. Two colossal ambitions came into collision.

One of the first things Albert did when he captured Bobby was to buy back the publishing from Witmark. He then set up a new publishing company, Dwarf Music, in which he gave himself a fifty per cent interest. At first glance, fifty per cent looks like he really took advantage of Bobby. Certainly he was underhanded. Remember, this is only the record business and Albert was relatively honest. He never explained himself to Bobby. He did go to

lengths to conceal the fifty-fifty split from Dylan. Albert Grossman was, after all, a promoter. The record industry itself will never get high marks for probity. The equation for theft is when one group controls the money and the other group provides the product.

The question here is not whether Albert stole from Bobby in the sense of juggling the accounting - you can be sure Albert took advantage of his position. However, whether he cheated Bobby by taking a fifty per cent interest in Dwarf is open to question, and I don't think he did.

It is hard to believe that Bob Dylan would have amounted to much if Albert Grossman hadn't been a promotional genius who recognized the potential which no one else, in fact, could see. Of course, today, long after the fact, Dylan's genius seems to have ensured success. At the time, however, that genius wasn't quite so obvious - indeed, I'm not so sure it ever existed.

I wasn't Johnny on the Spot when it came to recognizing Dylan's talent. I didn't hear of him until 1964 when my brother-in-law played the first couple of records for me. All I could hear was a guy thwacking away noisily on guitar punctuating his horrid screeching with cacophonous bursts on a harmonica. It might as well have been an air raid. I was thoroughly repelled. I wouldn't have listened to Dylan again but my brother-in-law, who had a curious ability to scent out the next big thing, insisted I listen to *what* he was saying. "The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind." To be sure. Well, I'm from the Midwest too. I recognized the catch phrases; Dylan uses a lot of Midwest catch phrases. I still wasn't impressed.

To me Dylan sounded illiterate. I ask you, what does "How many times must a man look up before he can see the sky?" mean? What does "How many seas must a white dove sail before she sleeps in the sand?" mean? Is there such a thing as a migrating white dove and do they ever sleep in the sand? Am I supposed to let my heart bleed for white doves that can't sleep in the sand tonight? The answer to those questions, my friend, isn't blowin' in the wind. The guy just said whatever came into his head. After his mind broke in 1966 and his muse left him, he came up with "Shut the light, shut the shade, you don't have to be afraid." I mean, *shade* and *afraid* do rhyme, but I had a problem understanding where the talent was. Protest singer? What's that to me? I never did march anyway.

If you listen to the 1963 *Newport Folk Festival* album, you'll hear Dylan singing Blowin' In The Wind sandwiched between Joan Baez and The Freedom Singers. Both back Bobby with a religious fervour the song doesn't bear before launching into an even more fanatical We Shall Overcome. Masters Of War? You've got to be kidding - a really puerile song. Dylan just said what no-one else wanted to put into words, although, once said, all those *Sing Out* types seemed to love it. But does anyone really believe that wars (pre-Bush, I mean) were promoted by a bunch of professional warriors sitting in a room trying to come up with ideas? Is that a valid explanation of how politics work? What happened to Bobby's notions of "fixtures and forces"? I really couldn't go with stuff like this.

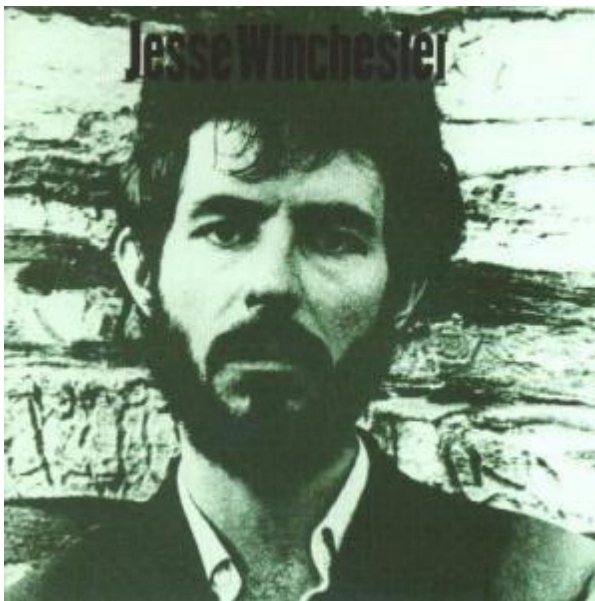
Impressed more by my brother-in-law's unerring ability to spot the next big thing than with Bobby, I went out and bought the records but I didn't listen to them, although I was increasingly impressed by the number of cover versions that were appearing. But it was Albert Grossman, not Bobby, doing that work.

But then *Bringing It All Back Home* tuned into my wavelength down around 1600. I was one of those *confused, accused, misused, abused, strung out ones and worse*. I placed myself in

the accused, abused and misused categories; A.J. Weberman, sorting through garbage cans, obviously placed himself with the strung out ones and worse. But there we have the spectrum of Bobby's wavelength.

By the time of *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde On Blonde* Bobby was like strong drink to me. I became a Bobaholic as he retreated deeper and deeper into the inner recesses of his mind, where a different logic prevailed, in an attempt to narrow his audience as much as possible. Strangely, the more he found his own audience, the greater his reputation grew.

Even though captivated by Dylan's "genius" I always remembered those lovely cover versions of his early songs. Don't you think those Byrds covers are too beautiful? I asked myself would I have stuck with Bobby if it hadn't been for those? I can't say, but they homogenized Bobby's quirky personality into a palatable product. When you couldn't handle Bobby's *Mr. Tambourine Man* you could switch to the Byrds'. Those cover versions, procured by Albert, are what made Dylan successful. Yes, Bob wrote the songs but he had nothing to do with either their placement or production. Bobby's self-appointed "partner" Albert did that. First he created Peter, Paul and Mary. Grossman's group was the key to Bob's success. It must be credited to Grossman that he seized the moment. This was his one chance for success and he caught the Golden Ring as it came around. The rest of Grossman's career was spent trying to replicate this golden moment and he couldn't do it, although he did have a "critical" success in establishing Bearsville Records. The label turned out some nice stuff including the very lovely catalogue of Jesse Winchester.



Jesse Winchester

However, Grossman's success was based on PP&M. Albert cleverly sensed the quasi religious spirit of the times. While the catchphrase of the era was "God Is Dead" Albert chose to name his group after three Christian saints. This was mildly off-putting to some. Grossman, himself a Jew, had his private joke as these three "Christian" saints were all Jews. His group started out singing stupid quasi religious songs like *If I Had A Hammer* and *This Land Is Your Land* - Guthrie stuff. Grossman was actually mired in the tastes of the fifties. This material in itself was off-putting, even though popular, as being too overtly political. PP&M really caught fire when Bobby, Albert's ace in the hole, came up with *Blowin' In The Wind*. The song was still quasi religious in tone but cleaner and more modern sounding while being, from my point of view, completely apolitical.

After a couple of successful covers by PP&M, the Byrds came in with really stunning contemporary versions of Bobby's songs. Within a year or two of that, whole albums were issued trying to cash in on Bobby as a songwriter. Ex New Christy Minstrel Barry McGuire for Chrissakes! Even that embarrassing Sinatra clone, Trini Lopez. So Albert had turned Bobby's catalogue gold - no mean trick - and Bobby's star rose as his reputation as a songwriter rose.

Albert pushed the envelope to secure as large a portion of the revenues for himself and Bobby as he could. Columbia had conned Dylan into a disadvantageous contract so Albert forced a change. He secured twenty-five per cent of the revenues from Bobby's records for himself which was far in advance of practice. However, Albert had been right. Pop album sales which had been miniscule in 1960 burgeoned into a multi-billion dollar segment by the end of the decade and Albert had positioned Bobby to benefit from this huge market.

Albert had bullied Columbia Records, Bobby's label, into giving him producers who would make the most of his talents. His unusual power-play tactics threw the fear of God into Columbia's executives. If Bobby hadn't signed a new contract - a fairly generous contract - behind Albert's back, Albert probably would have secured an even richer contract. Remember that Albert had the incentive of twenty-five per cent of Dylan's record revenues.

One must accept the fact that Albert Grossman managed Dylan's career to perfection. One must accept the fact that Dylan would have been worth much less financially, perhaps worthless without the aid and support of Albert Grossman. But then Bob discovered that Albert had - and this is important - given himself fifty per cent of Dwarf Music, not only without telling Bobby but actively hiding the knowledge from him. Bobby saw only his own genius while ignoring Albert's. Without thinking it out, he chose to feel betrayed. Albert traded on Bobby's trust but I do not believe Albert betrayed him. I think Albert was the best friend Bobby ever had. I believe that Albert was entitled to fifty per cent of Bobby's earnings in perpetuity. I'd have to say that Bobby played the churl in not recognizing Albert's contribution to his success. Still, Bobby is the artist while Albert is only the promoter. Which is the tail and which the dog? Did you ever see a dog run round and round chasing its tail?



I ate the whole thing ...