

## BOB DYLAN AT MUSICARES, 2015

Established in 1989 by the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, the MusiCares Foundation offers support to musicians in times of financial, personal or medical crisis. On the evening of Friday 6 February 2015 in the West Hall of the Los Angeles Convention Center, Bob Dylan accepted their Person of the Year award. After a musical tribute from seventeen acts who each performed a Dylan song (see set list below), the award was presented by 90 year old former President Jimmy Carter.



[Jimmy Carter and Bob Dylan](#)

And then? A few gnomic words from the recipient followed by a rapid exit? No indeed. Reproduced below is the full text of his 30 minute acceptance speech:

There are a few people we need to thank tonight for bringing about this grand event. Neil Portnow, Dana Tamarkin, Rob Light, Brian Greenbaum, Don Was. And I also want to thank President Carter for coming. It's been a long night, and I don't want to talk too much, but I'll say a few things.

I'm glad for my songs to be honored like this. But you know, they didn't get here by themselves. It's been a long road and it's taken a lot of doing. These songs of mine, I think of as mystery plays, the kind that Shakespeare saw when he was growing up. I think you could trace what I do back that far. They were on the fringes then, and I think they're on the fringes now. And they sound like they've been traveling on hard ground.



I need to mention a few people along the way who brought this about. I know I should mention John Hammond, the great talent scout, who way back when brought me to Columbia Records. He signed me to that label when I was nobody. It took a lot of faith to do that, and he took a lot of ridicule, but he was his own man and he was courageous, and for that, I'm eternally grateful. The last person he discovered before me was Aretha Franklin, and before that Count Basie, Billie Holiday and a whole lot of other artists. All non-commercial artists. Trends did not interest John, and I was very non-commercial but he stayed with me. He believed in my talent and that's all that mattered. I can't thank him enough for that.

Lou Levy ran Leeds Music, and they published my earliest songs, but I didn't stay there too long. Levy himself, he went back a long ways. He signed me to that company and recorded my songs and I sang them into a tape recorder. He told me outright, there was no precedent for what I was doing, that I was either before my time or behind it. And if I brought him a song like *Stardust*, he'd turn it down because it would be too late. He told me that if I was before my time - and he didn't really know that for sure - but if it was happening and if it was true, the public would usually take three to five years to catch up, so be prepared. And that did happen. The

trouble was, when the public did catch up I was already three to five years beyond that, so it kind of complicated it. But he was encouraging, and he didn't judge me, and I'll always remember him for that.

Artie Mogull at Witmark Music signed me next to his company, and he told me to just keep writing songs no matter what, that I might be on to something. Well, he too stood behind me, and he could never wait to see what I'd give him next. I didn't even think of myself as a songwriter before then. I'll always be grateful for him also for that attitude.

I also have to mention some of the early artists who recorded my songs very, very early, without having to be asked. Just something they felt about them that was right for them. I've got to say thank you to Peter, Paul and Mary, who I knew all separately before they ever became a group. I didn't even think of myself as writing songs for others to sing but it was starting to happen and it couldn't have happened to, or with, a better group. They took a song of mine that had been recorded before that was buried on one of my records and turned it into a hit song. Not the way I would have done it - they straightened it out. But since then hundreds of people have recorded it and I don't think that would have happened if it wasn't for them. They definitely started something for me. The Byrds, The Turtles, Sonny & Cher - they made some of my songs Top 10 hits but I wasn't a pop songwriter and I really didn't want to be that, but it was good that it happened. Their versions of my songs were like commercials, but I didn't really mind that because fifty years later my songs were being used in the commercials, so that was good too. I was glad it happened, and I was glad they'd done it.

Pervis Staples and The Staple Singers - long before they were on Stax they were on Epic and they were one of my favorite groups of all time. I met them all in '62 or '63. They heard my songs live and Pervis wanted to record three or four of them and he did with The Staple Singers. They were the type of artists that I wanted recording my songs, if anybody was going to do it. Nina Simone - I used to cross paths with her in New York City in the Village Gate nightclub. She was an artist I definitely looked up to. She recorded some of my songs that she learned directly from me, sitting in a dressing room. She was an overwhelming artist, piano player and singer. Very strong woman, very outspoken and dynamite to see perform. That she was recording my songs validated everything that I was about. Nina was the kind of artist that I loved and admired. Oh, and I can't forget Jimi Hendrix. I actually saw Jimi Hendrix perform when he was in a band called Jimmy James and The Blue Flames - something like that. And Jimi didn't even sing. He was just the guitar player. After he became famous, he took some small songs of mine that nobody paid any attention to and pumped them up into the outer limits of the stratosphere and turned them all into classics. I have to thank Jimi, too. I wish he was here.

Johnny Cash recorded some of my songs early on, too, I met him in about '63, when he was all skin and bones. He traveled long, he traveled hard, but he was a hero of mine. I heard many of his songs growing up. I knew them better than I knew my own. *Big River, I Walk The Line, How High's The Water, Mama?* I wrote *It's Alright Ma (I'm*

*Only Bleeding*) with that song reverberating inside my head. I still ask "How high is the water, Mama?" Johnny was an intense character. And he saw that people were putting me down playing electric music, and he posted letters to magazines scolding people, telling them to shut up and let him sing. In Johnny Cash's world - hardcore Southern drama - that kind of thing didn't exist. Nobody told anybody what to sing or do. They just didn't do that kind of thing where he came from. I'm always going to thank him for that. Johnny Cash was a giant of a man, the man in black, and I'll always cherish the friendship we had until the day there is no more days.



Oh, and I'd be remiss if I didn't mention Joan Baez. She was the queen of folk music then and now. She took a liking to my songs and brought me with her to play concerts, where she had crowds of thousands of people enthralled with her beauty and voice. People would say, "What are you doing with that ragtag scrubby-looking waif?" And she'd tell everybody in no uncertain terms, "Now you better be quiet and listen to the songs." We even played a few of them together. Joan Baez is as tough-minded as they come, loyal, free-minded and fiercely independent. Nobody can tell her what to do if she doesn't want to do it. I learned a lot of things from her. A woman of devastating honesty. And for her kind of love and devotion, I could never pay that back.

These songs didn't come out of thin air. I didn't just make them up out of whole cloth. Contrary to what Lou Levy said, there was a precedent. It all came out of traditional music: traditional folk music, traditional rock 'n' roll and traditional big band swing orchestra music. I learned lyrics and how to write them from listening to folk songs. And I played them, and I met other people that played them, back when nobody was doing it. Sang nothing but these folk songs, and they gave me the code for everything that's fair game, that everything belongs to everyone. For three or four years all I listened to were folk standards. I went to sleep singing folk songs. I sang them everywhere - clubs, parties, bars, coffeehouses, fields, festivals. And I met other singers along the way who did the same thing and we just learned songs from each other. I could learn one song and sing it next in an hour if I'd heard it just once. If you sang *John Henry* as many times as me - *John Henry was a steel-driving man / Died with a hammer in his hand / John Henry said a man ain't nothin' but a man / Before I let that steam drill drive me down / I'll die with that hammer in my hand* - if you had sung that song as many times as I did, you'd have written *How many roads must a man walk down?* too.

Big Bill Broonzy had a song called *Key To The Highway* - *I've got a key to the highway / I'm booked and I'm bound to go / Gonna leave here runnin' / Because walking is most too slow*. I sang that a lot. If you sing that a lot, you just might write, *Georgia Sam, he had a bloody nose / Welfare Department they wouldn't give him no clothes / He asked poor Howard "Where can I go?" / Howard said "There's only one place I know / Sam said "Tell me quick, man, I got to run / Howard just pointed with his gun / And said "That way, down on Highway 61*. You'd have written that too if you'd sang *Key To The Highway* as much as me.

*Ain't no use to sit 'n cry / You'll be an angel by and by / Sail away, ladies, sail away ... I'm sailing away my own true love*. *Boots Of Spanish Leather* - Sheryl Crow just sung that. *Roll the cotton down, aw, yeah / Roll the cotton down / Ten dollars a day is a white man's pay / Roll the cotton down / A dollar a day is the black man's pay / Roll the cotton down*. If you sang that song as many times as me, you'd be writing *I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more*, too. If you'd have listened to Robert Johnson singing *Better come in my kitchen, 'cause it's gonna be raining out doors* as many time as I listened to it, sometime later you just might write *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall*.

I sang a lot of "come all you" songs. There's plenty of them. There's way too many to be counted. *Come along boys and listen to my tale / Tell you of my troubles on the old Chisholm Trail*. Or *Come all ye good people, listen while I tell / the fate of Floyd Collins, a lad we all know well ... Come all ye fair and tender ladies / Take warning how you court your men / They're like a star on a summer morning / They first appear and then they're gone again*. And then there's this one - *Gather 'round, people / A story I will tell / 'Bout Pretty Boy Floyd, the outlaw / Oklahoma knew him well*. If you sung all these "come all ye" songs all the time like I did, you'd be writing, *Come gather 'round people wherever you roam / Admit that the waters around you have grown / Accept that soon you'll be drenched to the bone / If your time to you is worth saving / And you better start swimming or you'll sink like a stone / For the*

*times they are a-changing*. You'd have written that too. There's nothing secret about it. You just do it subliminally and unconsciously, because that's all enough, and that's all you know. That was all that was dear to me. They were the only kinds of songs that made sense. *When you go down to Deep Ellum keep your money in your socks / Women on Deep Ellum put you on the rocks*. Sing that song for a while and you just might come up with *When you're lost in the rain in Juarez and it's Easter time too / And your gravity's down and negativity don't pull you through / Don't put on any airs when you're down on Rue Morgue Avenue / They got some hungry women there and they really make a mess outta you*. All these songs are connected. Don't be fooled. I just opened up a different door in a different kind of way. It's just different, saying the same thing. I didn't think it was anything out of the ordinary.

Well you know, I just thought I was doing something natural, but right from the start, my songs were divisive for some reason. They divided people. I never knew why. Some got angered, others loved them. Didn't know why my songs had detractors and supporters. A strange environment to have to throw your songs into, but I did it anyway. Last thing I thought of was who cared about what song I was writing. I was just writing them. I didn't think I was doing anything different. I thought I was just extending the line. Maybe a little bit unruly, but I was just elaborating on situations. Maybe hard to pin down, but so what? A lot of people are hard to pin down and you've just got to bear it. In a sense everything evened itself out.

Leiber and Stoller didn't think much of my songs. They didn't like 'em, but Doc Pomus did. That was all right that they didn't like 'em, because I never liked their songs either. *Yakety yak, don't talk back, Charlie Brown is a clown, Baby I'm a hog for you* - novelty songs, not serious. Doc's songs, they were better - *This Magic Moment, Lonely Avenue, Save The Last Dance For Me* - those songs broke my heart. I figured I'd rather have his blessings any day than theirs. Ahmet Ertegun didn't think much of my songs, but Sam Phillips did. Ahmet founded Atlantic Records. He produced some great records: Ray Charles, Ruth Brown, LaVerne Baker, just to name a few. There were some great records in there, no doubt about it. But Sam Phillips, he recorded Elvis and Jerry Lee, Carl Perkins and Johnny Cash. Radical artists that shook the very essence of humanity. Revolutionaries with vision and foresight. Fearless and sensitive at the same time. Revolution in style and scope. Radical to the bone. Songs that cut you to the bone. Renegades in all degrees, doing songs that would never decay, and still resound to this day. Oh, yeah, I'd rather have Sam Phillips' blessing any day.

Merle Haggard didn't think much of my songs, but Buck Owens did, and Buck even recorded some of my early songs. Now I admire Merle - *Mama Tried, Tonight The Bottle Let Me Down, I'm A Lonesome Fugitive* - I understand all that, but I can't imagine Waylon Jennings singing *The Bottle Let Me Down*. I love Merle but he's not Buck. Buck Owens wrote *Together Again* and that song trumps anything that ever came out of Bakersfield. Buck Owens and Merle Haggard? If you have to have somebody's blessing ... You figure it out. What I'm saying here is that my songs seem to divide people. Even people in the music community. People in the critical world too. Critics have always been on my tail since day one. Seems like they've always given me special treatment. Some of the music critics say I can't sing. I croak. Sound

like a frog. Why don't these same critics say similar things about Tom Waits? They say my voice is shot. That I have no voice. Why don't they say those things about Leonard Cohen? Why do I get special treatment? Critics say I can't carry a tune and I talk my way through a song. Really? I've never heard that said about Lou Reed. Why does he get to go scot free? What have I done to deserve this special treatment? Why me, Lord? No vocal range? When's the last time you've read that about Dr. John? You've never read that about Dr. John. Why don't they say that about him? Slur my words, got no diction. You have to wonder if these critics have ever heard Charley Patton or Son House or Wolf. Talk about slurred words and no diction. Why don't they say those same things about them. Why me, Lord?



Critics say I mangle my melodies, render my songs unrecognizable. Oh, really? Let me tell you something. I was at a boxing match a few years ago seeing Floyd Mayweather fight a Puerto Rican guy. And the Puerto Rican national anthem, somebody sang it and it was beautiful. It was heartfelt and it was moving. After that it was time for our national anthem. And a very popular soul-singing sister was chosen to sing. She sang every note that exists, and some that don't exist. Talk about mangling a melody. You take a one syllable word and make it last for 15 minutes? She was doing vocal gymnastics like she was a trapeze act. But to me it was not funny. Where were the critics? Mangling lyrics? Mangling a melody? Mangling a treasured song? No, I get the blame. But I don't really think I do that. I just think critics say I do. Sam Cooke said this when told he had a beautiful voice: He said, "Well, that's very kind of you, but voices ought not to be measured by how pretty they are. Instead they matter only if they convince you that they are telling the truth." Think about that the next time you are listening to a singer.

Times always change. They really do. And you have to always be ready for something that's coming along and you never expected it. Way back when, I was in Nashville making some records and I read this article, a Tom T. Hall interview. Tom T. Hall, he was bitching about some kind of new song, and he couldn't understand what these

new kinds of songs that were coming in were about. Now Tom, he was one of the most pre-eminent songwriters of the time in Nashville. A lot of people were recording his songs and he himself even did it. But he was all in a fuss about James Taylor, a song James had called *Country Road*. Tom was going off in this interview: "But James don't say nothing about a country road. He's just says how you can feel it on the country road. I don't understand that." Now some might say Tom is a great songwriter. I'm not going to doubt that. At the time he was doing this interview I was actually listening to a song of his on the radio. It was called *I Love*. I was listening to it in a recording studio, and he was talking about all the things he loves, an everyman kind of song, trying to connect with people. Trying to make you think that he's just like you and you're just like him. We all love the same things, and we're all in this together. Tom loves little baby ducks, slow-moving trains and rain. He loves old pickup trucks and little country streams. Sleep without dreams. Bourbon in a glass. Coffee in a cup. Tomatoes on the vine, and onions. Now, listen, I'm not ever going to disparage another songwriter. I'm not going to do that. I'm not saying it's a bad song. I'm just saying it might be a little overcooked. But, you know, it was in the Top 10 anyway.

Tom and a few other writers had the whole Nashville scene sewed up in a box. If you wanted to record a song and get it in the Top 10 you had to go to them, and Tom was one of the top guys. They were all very comfortable, doing their thing. This was about the time that Willie Nelson picked up and moved to Texas. About the same time. He's still in Texas. Everything was very copacetic. Everything was all right until... until Kristofferson came to town. Oh, they ain't seen anybody like him. He came into town like the wildcat that he was, flew a helicopter into Johnny Cash's backyard. Not your typical songwriter. And he went for the throat. *Sunday Morning Coming Down: Well, I woke up Sunday morning / With no way to hold my head that didn't hurt / And the beer I had for breakfast wasn't bad / So I had one more for dessert / Then I fumbled through my closet / Found my cleanest dirty shirt / Then I washed my face and combed my hair / And stumbled down the stairs to meet the day.* You can look at Nashville pre-Kris and post-Kris, because he changed everything. That one song blew ol' Tom T. Hall's world apart. He couldn't see it coming. It might have sent him to the mad house. God forbid he ever heard any of my songs. *You walk into the room / With your pencil in your hand / You see somebody naked / You say "Who is that man?" / You try so hard / But you don't understand / Just what you're gonna say / When you get home / Because something is happening / And you don't know what it is / Do you, Mister Jones?* If *Sunday Morning Coming Down* rattled Tom's cage, sent him into the loony bin, my song surely would have made him blow his brains out, right there in the loony bin. Hopefully he didn't hear it.

I just released an album of standards, all the songs usually done by Michael Buble, Harry Connick Jr., maybe Brian Wilson's done a couple, Linda Ronstadt done 'em. Rod of course, even Paul has done some of this kind of material. But the reviews of their records aren't like mine. In their reviews no one says anything. In my reviews, they've got to look under every stone and report about it. In the reviews they get, you seldom see any of the songwriters' names. Unlike mine. They've got to mention all the songwriters' names. Well that's okay with me. After all, they're great songwriters

and these are standards. I've seen the reviews come in, and they'll mention all the songwriters in half the review, as if everybody knows them. Nobody's heard of them, not in this time, anyway. Buddy Kaye, Cy Coleman, Carolyn Leigh, to name a few. But, you know, I'm glad they mention their names, and you know what? I'm glad they got their names in the press. It might have taken some time to do it, but they're finally there with importance and dignity. I can only wonder why it took so long. My only regret is that they're not here to see it.

Traditional rock 'n' roll, we're talking about that. It's all about rhythm. Johnny Cash said it best: *Get rhythm. Get rhythm when you get the blues.* Very few rock 'n' roll bands today play with rhythm. They don't know what it is. Rock 'n' roll is a combination of blues, and it's a strange thing made up of two parts. A lot of people don't know this, but the blues, which is an American music, is not what you think it is. It's a combination of Arabic violins and Strauss waltzes, working it out. But it's true. The other half of rock 'n' roll has got to be hillbilly. And that's a derogatory term, but it ought not to be. That's a term that includes the Delmore Bros., Stanley Bros., Roscoe Holcomb, Git Tanner and The Skillet Lickers, groups like that. Moonshine gone berserk. Fast cars on dirt roads. That's the kind of combination that makes up rock 'n' roll, and it can't be cooked up in a science laboratory or a studio. You have to have the right kind of rhythm to play this kind of music. If you can't hardly play the blues, and you don't have the hillbilly feeling, you're not really playing rock 'n' roll. It might be something else but it's not that. You can fake it, but you can't make it.

Critics have said that I've made a career out of confounding expectations. Really? Because that's all I do? That's how I think about it? Confounding expectations? Like I stay up late at night thinking about how to do it? "What do you do for a living, man?" "Oh, I confound expectations." You're going to get a job, the man says, "What do you do?" "Oh, confound expectations." And the man says, "Well, we already have that spot filled. Call us back. Or don't call us, we'll call you." Confounding expectations. I don't even know what that means or who has time for it. Why me, Lord? My work confounds them obviously, but I really don't know how I do it. The Blackwood Bros. have been talking to me about making a record together. That might confound expectations, but it shouldn't. Of course, it would be a gospel album. I don't think it would be anything out of the ordinary for me. Not a bit.

One of the songs I'm thinking about singing is *Stand By Me* with the Blackwood Brothers. Not *Stand By Me* the pop song - no, the real *Stand By Me*. The real one goes like this: *When the storm of life is raging / Stand by me / When the storm of life is raging / Stand by me / When the world is tossing me / Like a ship upon the sea / Thou who rulest wind and water / Stand by me // In the midst of tribulation / Stand by me / In the midst of tribulation / Stand by me / When the hosts of hell assail / And my strength begins to fail / Thou who never lost a battle / Stand by me // In the midst of faults and failures / Stand by me / In the midst of faults and failures / Stand by me / When I do the best I can / And my friends don't understand / Thou who knowest all about me / Stand by me.* That's the song. I like it better than the pop song. If I record one by that name, that's going to be the one. I'm also thinking of recording a song, not for that album, though, a song called *Oh Lord, Please Don't Let Me Be Misunder-*

*stood*. But I don't know, it might be good on the gospel album too.

Anyway, I'm proud to be here tonight for MusiCares. I'm honored to have all these artists singing my songs. There's nothing like that. Great artists who all know how to sing the truth, and you can hear it in their voices. I'm proud to be here tonight for MusiCares. I think a lot of this organization. They've helped many people, many musicians who have contributed a lot to our culture. I'd like to personally thank them for what they did for a friend of mine, Billy Lee Riley, a friend of mine who they helped for six years when he was down and couldn't work. Billy was a Sun rock 'n' roll artist. He was a true original. He did it all; played, sang and wrote. He would have been a bigger star but Jerry Lee came along. And you know what happens when someone like that comes along. You kind of have to take a step back. You just don't stand a chance. So Billy became what is known in the industry - a condescending term, by the way - as a one hit wonder. But sometimes, just sometimes, once in a while, a one hit wonder can make a more powerful impact than a recording star who's got twenty or thirty hits behind him. And Billy's hit song was called *Red Hot*, and it was red hot. It could blast you out of your skull and make you feel happy about it. Change your life. He did it with power and style and grace. You won't find him in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He's not there. Metallica is. Abba is. Mamas and The Papas - I know they're in there. Jefferson Airplane, Alice Cooper, Steely Dan - I've got nothing against Metal, Soft Rock, Hard Rock, Psychedelic Pop. I got nothing against any of that stuff. But, after all, it is called the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Billy Lee Riley is not there. Yet. And it's taking too long.

I'd see him a couple times a year and we'd always spend time together and he was on a rockabilly festival nostalgia circuit, and we'd cross paths now and again. We'd always spend time together. He was a hero of mine. I'd heard *Red Hot* - I must have been only 15 or 16 when I did, and it's impressed me to this day. I never grow tired of listening to it. Never got tired of watching Billy Lee perform, either. We spent time together just talking and playing into the night. He was a deep, truthful man. He wasn't bitter or nostalgic. He just accepted it. He knew where he had come from and he was content with who he was. And then one day he got sick. And like my friend John Mellencamp would sing - because John sang some truth today - *One day you get sick and you don't get better*. That's from a song of his called *Life Is Short Even On Its Longest Days*. It's one of the better songs of the last few years, actually. I ain't lying. And I ain't lying when I tell you that MusiCares paid for my friend's doctor bills, mortgage and gave him spending money. They were able to at least make his life comfortable, tolerable to the end. That is something that can't be repaid. Any organization that would do that would have to have my blessing.

I'm going to get out of here now. I'm going to put an egg in my shoe and beat it. I probably left out a lot of people and said too much about some. But that's okay. Like the spiritual song, I'm still just crossing over Jordan too. Let's hope we meet again. Sometime. And we will, if, like Hank Williams says, *the good Lord is willing and the creek don't rise*.

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## Tribute acts set list

*Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat* by Beck / *Shooting Star* by Aaron Neville / *Subterranean Homesick Blues* by Alanis Morissette / *On A Night Like This* by Los Lobos / *Señor (Tales Of Yankee Power)* by Willie Nelson / *Blind Willie McTell* by Jackson Browne / *Highway 61 Revisited* by John Mellencamp / *One More Cup Of Coffee* by Jack White / *What Good Am I?* by Tom Jones / *I'll Be Your Baby Tonight* by Norah Jones / *Million Miles* by Derek Trucks And Susan Tedeschi / *Pressing On* by John Doe / *Girl From The North Country* by Crosby, Stills & Nash / *Standing In The Doorway* by Bonnie Raitt / *Boots Of Spanish Leather* by Sheryl Crow / *Knockin' On Heaven's Door* by Bruce Springsteen / *Blowin' In The Wind* by Neil Young



MusiCares 2015: Bruce Springsteen, Willie Nelson, Norah Jones, Neil Young

# Bob Dylan: The Uncut Interview

by Robert Love, AARP The Magazine, February / March 2015

## THE SONGS

"I've always been drawn to spiritual songs," Bob Dylan tells me. "In *Amazing Grace*, that line - *that saved a wretch like me* - isn't that something we could all say if we were honest enough?" At 73, Dylan is still in the game, still brutally honest and authentically himself ... In the 9,000 or so words that follow, Dylan goes where he has rarely gone before in public conversation, exploring his creative process and offering his insights on songwriting, performing, recording, and the creative destruction unleashed by rock and roll. For fun, perhaps, he tosses us a few pointed asides on contemporaries like Elton John, Rod Stewart and Eric Clapton, but reserves his undiluted praise for Chuck Berry's poetry and Billy Graham's soul-searing hellfire.

You may be struck, as I was time and again, at just how powerful a force music has played in Dylan's life. At various times he was *hypnotized, spellbound, lifted, knocked out* by what he'd heard. Listening to the Staple Singers for the first time at 14, he said, he couldn't sleep that night. "It just went through me like my body was invisible." From the moment he stumbled upon blues, country and gospel at the nether end of the radio dial, he never stopped listening closely, absorbing the best. A student and professor of America's truest music, he begins our conversation by explaining his decision to record ten beloved standards for *Shadows in the Night*.

### **After several critically acclaimed records of original songs, why did you make this record now?**

Now is the right time. I've been thinking about it for a while ever since I heard Willie's *Stardust* record in the late '70s. I thought I could do that, too. So I went to see Walter Yetnikoff, he was the president of Columbia Records. I told him I wanted to make a record of standards, like Willie's record. What he said was, "You can go ahead and make that record, but we won't pay for it, and we won't release it. But go ahead and make it if you want to." So I went and made *Street Legal* instead. In retrospect, Yetnikoff was probably right. It was most likely too soon for me to make a record of standards.

All through the years, I've heard these songs being recorded by other people and I've always wanted to do that. And I wondered if anybody else saw it the way I did. I was looking forward to hearing Rod [Stewart]'s records of standards. I thought if anybody could bring something different to these songs, Rod certainly could. But the records were disappointing. Rod's a great singer. He's got a great voice, but there's no point to put a 30-piece orchestra behind him. I'm not going to knock anybody's right to make a living but you can always tell if somebody's heart and soul is into something, and I didn't think Rod was into it in that way. It sounds like so many records where the vocals are overdubbed and these kind of songs don't come off well if you use modern recording techniques.

To those of us who grew up with these kinds of songs and didn't think much of it, these are the same songs that rock 'n' roll came to destroy - music hall, tangos, pop songs from the '40s, fox-trots, rumbas, Irving Berlin, Gershwin, Harold Arlen, Hammerstein. Composers of great renown. It's hard for modern singers to connect with that kind of music and song. When we finally went to record, I had about 30 songs, and these 10 fall together to create a certain kind of drama. They all seem connected in one way or another. We were playing a lot of these songs at sound checks on stages around the world without a vocal mic, and you could hear everything pretty well. You usually hear these songs with a full-out orchestra. But I was playing them with a five-piece band and didn't miss the orchestra. Of course, a producer would have come in and said, "Let's put strings here and a horn section there." But I wasn't going to do that. I wasn't even going to use keyboards or a grand piano. The piano covers too much territory and can dominate songs like this in ways you don't want them to. One of the keys to making this record was to get the piano right off the floor and not be influenced by it in any way.

**It's going to be something of a surprise to your traditional fans, don't you think?**

Well, they shouldn't be surprised. There's a lot of types of songs I've sung over the years, and they definitely have heard me sing standards before.

**Did you know many of these songs from your childhood? Some of them are pretty old.**

Yeah, I did. I don't usually forget songs if I like them. It could be 30 years ago or something.

**What was your process like?**

Once you think you know the song, then you have to go and see how other people have done it. One version led to another until we were starting to assimilate even Harry James's arrangements. Or even Pérez Prado's. My pedal steel player is a genius at that. He can play anything from hillbilly to bebop. There are only two guitars in there, and one is just playing the pulse. Stand-up bass is playing orchestrated moving lines. It's almost like folk music in a way. I mean, there are no drums in a Bill Munroe band. Hank Williams didn't use them either. Sometimes the beat takes the mystery out of the rhythm. Maybe all the time. I could only record these songs one way, and that was live on the floor with a very small number of mics. No headphones, no overdubs, no vocal booth, no separate tracking. I know it's the old-fashioned way, but to me it's the only way that would have worked for songs like this. Vocally, I think I sang about 6 inches away from the mic. It's a board mix, for the most part, mixed as it was recorded. We played the song a few times for the engineer. He put a few microphones around. I told him we would play it as many times as he wanted. That's the way each song was done.

**It sounds like the microphone was right in your face.**

Yeah, yeah.

**It is a very intimate rendering of this material. I assume that's what you wanted.**

Exactly. We recorded it in the Capitol studios, which is good for a record like this. But we didn't use any of the new equipment. The engineer had his own equipment left over from bygone days, and he brought all that in. Like I said before, I rehearsed the band all last fall in a tour we were doing over in Europe. We rehearsed a whole bunch of things on the stage, with no microphones so we could play at the right volume. By the time we went in to make this record, it was almost like we'd done it already.

**Beautiful horns. Really low-key. Atmospheric almost.**

Yeah, but there are only a few. French horn, a trumpet, a trombone, all played in harmony. Together they make a beautiful sound.

**Did you do the arrangements?**

No. The original arrangements were for up to 30 pieces. We couldn't match that and didn't even try. What we had to do was fundamentally get to the bottom of what makes these songs alive. We took only the necessary parts to make that happen. In a case like this, you have to trust your own instincts.

**Did you listen to multiple versions and then throw them away, cleanse your palate and come up with your own version?**

Well, a lot of these songs, you know, have been pounded into the ground over the years. I wanted to use songs that everybody knows or thinks they know. I wanted to show them a different side of it and opened up that world in a more unique way. You have to believe what the words are saying and the words are as important as the melody. Unless you believe the song and have lived it, there's little sense in performing it. *Some Enchanted Evening* - that would be one. Another one would be *Autumn Leaves*. That's a song that's been done to death. I mean, who hasn't done that song? You sing *Autumn Leaves* and you have to know something about love and loss and feel it just as much, or there's no point in doing it. It's too deep a song. A schoolboy could never do it convincingly. People talk about Frank [Sinatra] all the time - and they should talk about Frank - but he had the greatest arrangers. And not only that, but he brought out the best in these guys. Billy May and Nelson Riddle or Gordon Jenkins. Whoever they were. They worked for him in a different kind of way than they worked for other people. They gave him arrangements that are just sublime on every level. And he, of course, could match that because he had this ability to get inside of the song in a sort of a conversational way. Frank sang *to* you, not *at* you, like so many pop singers today. Even singers of standards. I never wanted to be a singer that sings at somebody. I've always wanted to sing to somebody. I would have gotten that subliminally from Frank many years ago. Hank Williams did that, too. He sang to you.

**This is a wide-ranging curation of songs from what people call the American Songbook. But I noticed Frank recorded all 10 of them. Was he on your mind?**

You know, when you start doing these songs, Frank's got to be on your mind. Because he is the mountain. That's the mountain you have to climb even if you only get part of the way there. And it's hard to find a song he did not do. He'd be the guy you got to check with. I particularly like Nancy, too. I think Nancy is head and shoulders above most of these girl singers today. She's so soulful also in a conversational way. And where'd she get that? Well, she's Frank's daughter, right? Just naturally. Frank Junior can sing, too. Just the same way, if you want to do a Woody Guthrie song, you have to go past Bruce Springsteen and get to Jack Elliott. Eventually, you'll get to Woody, but it might be a long process.

**You've written about how Frank's version of the classic song *Ebb Tide* knocked you back on your heels in the '60s. But you said, "I couldn't listen to the stuff now. It wasn't the right time."**

Totally ... Yeah. Really. There are a lot of things like that in my past that I've had to let be and keep moving in my own direction. It would overwhelm me at times, because that's a world that is not your world. *Ebb Tide* was a song that I kind of grew up with. I don't know exactly when it was. But it was a hit song, a pop song. Roy Hamilton did it and he was a fantastic singer, and he did it in a grandiose way. And I thought I knew it. Then I was at somebody's house, and they had one of Frank's records, and *Ebb Tide* was on it. I must have listened to that thing 100 times. I realized then that I didn't know it. I still don't know it to this day. I don't know how he did it. The performance hypnotizes you. It's a spellbinding performance. I never heard anything so supreme - on every single level.

**Maybe that music was just too square to admit to liking back then?**

Square? I don't think anybody would have been bold enough to call Frank Sinatra square. Kerouac listened to him, along with Bird [Charlie Parker] and Dizzy [Gillespie]. But I myself never bought any Frank Sinatra records back then, if that's what you mean. I never listened to Frank as an influence. All I had to go on were records, and they were all over the place, orchestrated in one way or another. Swing music, Count Basie, romantic ballads, jazz bands - it was hard to get a fix on him. But like I say, you'd hear him anyway. You'd hear him in a car or a jukebox. You were conscious of Frank Sinatra no matter what age you were. Certainly nobody worshipped Frank Sinatra in the '60s like they did in the '40s. But he never went away. All those other things that we thought were here to stay, they did go away. But he never did.

**Do you think of this album as risky? These songs have fans who will say you can't touch Sinatra's version.**

Risky? Like walking across a field laced with land mines? Or working in a poison gas factory? There's nothing risky about making records. Comparing me with Frank Sinatra? You must be joking. To be mentioned in the same breath as him must be some sort of high compliment. As far as touching him goes, nobody touches him. Not me or anyone else.

**What do you think Frank would make of this album?**

I think first of all he'd be amazed I did these songs with a five-piece band. I think he'd be proud in a certain way.

## **THE HISTORY**

### **What other kinds of music did you listen to growing up?**

Early on, before rock 'n' roll, I listened to big band music: Harry James, Russ Columbo, Glenn Miller. Singers like Jo Stafford, Kay Starr, Dick Haymes. Anything that came over the radio and music played by bands in hotels that our parents could dance to. We had a big radio that looked like a jukebox, with a record player on the top.

All the furniture had been left in the house by the previous owners, including a piano. The radio/record player played 78-rpm records. And when we moved to that house, there was a record on there. The record had a red label, and I think it was a Columbia record. It was Bill Monroe singing, or maybe it was the Stanley Brothers. And they were singing *Drifting Too Far From The Shore*. I'd never heard anything like that before. Ever. And it moved me away from all the conventional music that I was hearing.

To understand that, you'd have to understand where I came from. I come from way north. We'd listen to radio shows all the time. I think I was the last generation, or pretty close to the last one, that grew up without TV. So we listened to the radio a lot. Most of these shows were theatrical radio dramas. For us, this was like our TV. Everything you heard, you could imagine what it looked like. Even singers that I would hear on the radio, I couldn't see what they looked like, so I imagined what they looked like. What they were wearing. What their movements were. Gene Vincent? When I first pictured him, he was a tall, lanky blond-haired guy.

### **Did it make you a better listener?**

It made me the listener that I am today. It made me listen for little things: the slamming of the door, the jingling of car keys. The wind blowing through trees, the songs of birds, footsteps, a hammer hitting a nail. Just random sounds. Cows mooing. I could string all that together and make that a song. It made me listen to life in a different way. I still listen to some of those old radio shows, and most of them still hold up. I mean, the jokes might be a little outdated, but the situations seem to be about the same. I don't listen to The Fat Man or Superman or Inner Sanctum in any way you could call nostalgic. They don't bring back any memories. I just like them.

### **What did you listen to besides the radio dramas?**

Up north, at night, you could find these radio stations with no name on the dials, you know, that played pre-rock 'n' roll things - country blues. We would hear Slim Harpo or Lightin' Slim and gospel groups, the Dixie Hummingbirds, the Five Blind Boys Of Alabama. I was so far north, I didn't even know where Alabama was. And then there'd be at a different hours the blues - you could hear Jimmy Reed, Wynonie

Harris and Little Walter. Then there was a station out of Chicago. WSM? Is that the one I'm thinking of? Played all hillbilly stuff. Riley Puckett, Uncle Dave Macon, the Delmore Brothers. We also heard the Grand Old Opry from Nashville every Saturday night. I heard Hank Williams way early, when he was still alive. A lot of those Opry stars, except for Hank, of course, came through the town I lived in and played at the Armory building. Webb Pierce, Hank Snow, Carl Smith, Porter Wagoner. I saw all those country stars growing up.

One night I was lying in bed and listening to the radio. I think it was a station out of Shreveport, Louisiana. I wasn't sure where Louisiana was either. I remember listening to the Staple Singers' *Uncloudy Day*. And it was the most mysterious thing I'd ever heard. It was like the fog rolling in. I heard it again, maybe the next night, and its mystery had even deepened. What was that? How do you make that? It just went through me like my body was invisible. What is that? A tremolo guitar? What's a tremolo guitar? I had no idea, I'd never seen one. And what kind of clapping is that? And that singer is pulling things out of my soul that I never knew were there. After hearing *Uncloudy Day* for the second time, I don't think I could even sleep that night. I knew these Staple Singers were different than any other gospel group. But who were they anyway?

I'd think about them even at my school desk. I managed to get down to the Twin Cities and get my hands on an LP of the Staple Singers, and one of the songs on it was *Uncloudy Day*. And I'm like, "Man!" I looked at the cover and studied it, like people used to do with covers of records. I knew who Mavis was without having to be told. I knew it was she who was singing the lead part. I knew who Pops was. All the information was on the back of the record. Not much, but enough to let me in just a little ways. Mavis looked to be about the same age as me in her picture. Her singing just knocked me out. I listened to the Staple Singers a lot. Certainly more than any other gospel group. I like spiritual songs. They struck me as truthful and serious. They brought me down to earth and they lifted me up all in the same moment. And Mavis was a great singer - deep and mysterious. And even at that young age, I felt that life itself was a mystery.

This was before folk music had ever entered my life. I was still an aspiring rock 'n' roller, the descendant, if you will, of the first generation of guys who played rock 'n' roll - who were thrown down. Buddy Holly, Little Richard, Chuck Berry, Carl Perkins, Gene Vincent, Jerry Lee Lewis. They played this type of music that was black and white. Extremely incendiary. Your clothes could catch fire. It was a mixture of black culture and hillbilly culture. When I first heard Chuck Berry, I didn't consider that he was black. I thought he was a white hillbilly. Little did I know, he was a great poet, too. "Flying across the desert in a TWA, I saw a woman walking 'cross the sand. She been walking 30 miles en route to Bombay to meet a brown-eyed handsome man." I didn't think about poetry at that time - those words just flew by. Only later did I realize how hard it is to write those kind of lyrics.

Chuck Berry could have been anything in the music business. He stopped where he was, but he could have been a jazz singer, a ballad singer, a guitar virtuoso. He could

have been a lot of things. But there's a spiritual aspect to him, too. In 50 or 100 years he might even be thought of as a religious icon. There's only one him, and what he does physically is even hard to do. If you see him in person, you know he goes out of tune a lot. But who wouldn't? He has to constantly be playing eighth notes on his guitar and sing at the same time, plus play fills and sing. People think that singing and playing is easy. It's not. It's easy to strum along with yourself, as you are singing a song and that's OK, but if you actually want to really play, where it's important, that's a hard thing and not too many people are good at it.

**And he was always the main guitar player in his band.**

He was the only guitar player. Yeah. And there was Jerry Lee [Lewis], his counterpart, and people like that. There must have been some elitist power that had to get rid of all these guys, to strike down rock 'n' roll for what it was and what it represented - not least of all it being a black-and-white thing. Tied together and welded shut. If you separate the pieces, you're killing it.

**Do you mean it's musical race-mixing, and that's what made it dangerous?**

Well, racial prejudice has been around a while, so yeah. And that was extremely threatening for the city fathers, I would think. When they finally recognized what it was, they had to dismantle it, which they did, starting with payola scandals and things like that. The black element was turned into soul music and the white element was turned into English pop. They separated it. I think of rock 'n' roll as a combination of country blues and swing band music, not Chicago blues, and modern pop. Real rock 'n' roll hasn't existed since when? 1961, 1962? Well, it was a part of my DNA, so it never disappeared from me. I just incorporated it into other aspects of what I was doing. I don't know if this is answering the question. [Laughs.] I can't remember what the question was.

**We were talking about your influences and your crush on Mavis Staples.**

Oh, the Staple Singers! Mavis! So I had seen this picture of the Staple Singers. And I said to myself, "You know, one day you'll be standing there with your arm around that girl." I remember thinking that. Ten years later, there I was - with my arm around her. But it felt so natural. Felt like I'd been there before, many times. Well I was, in my mind.

**Did you recall your original thought?**

No! I was moving too fast. Not until 10 years more beyond that did I remember anything about it.

**I was thinking how important it was to you when you were young to chase down those Woody Guthrie records. And I was thinking about how Mick [Jagger] and Keith [Richards] ran all over London to get blues records, and how Neil Young pumped quarters into the jukebox to hear Ian and Sylvia. And now the Internet has**

**all of it — you can just touch a button and hear almost anything in the history of recorded music. Has it made music better? Or worse? More valued or less valued?**

Well, if you're just a member of the general public, and you have all this music available to you, what do you listen to? How many of these things are you going to listen to at the same time? Your head is just going to get jammed - it's all going to become a blur, I would think. Back in the day, if you wanted to hear Memphis Minnie, you had to seek a compilation record, which would have a Memphis Minnie song on it. And if you heard Memphis Minnie back then, you would just accidentally discover her on a record that also had Son House and Skip James and the Memphis Jug Band. And then maybe you'd seek Memphis Minnie in some other places - a song here, a song there. You'd try to find out who she was. Is she still alive? Does she play? Can she teach me anything? Can I hang out with her? Can I do anything for her? Does she need anything? But now, if you want to hear Memphis Minnie, you can go hear a thousand songs. Likewise, all the rest of those performers, like Blind Lemon [Jefferson]. In the old days, maybe you'd hear *Matchbox* and *Prison Cell Blues*. That would be all you would hear, so those songs would be prominent in your mind. But when you hear an onslaught of 100 more songs of Blind Lemon, then it's like, "Oh man! This is overkill!" It's so easy you might appreciate it a lot less.

## **THE ALBUM**

**Are the songs on this album laid down in the order you would like people to listen to them? Or do you care whether Apple sells them one by one?**

The business end of the record - it's none of my business. I sure hope it sells, and I would like people to listen to it. But the way people listen to music has changed, and I hope they get a chance to hear all the songs in one way or another. But! I did record those songs, believe it or not, in that same order that you hear them. Not that it matters, really. I didn't pay any attention to the sequencing like on other records. We would usually get one song done in three hours. There's no mixing. That's just the way it sounded. No dials, nothing enhanced, nothing - that's it. Capitol's got those big echo chambers. So some of that was probably used. We used as little technology as possible. It's been done wrong too many other times. I wanted to do it right.

**Was this recording an experiment?**

It was more than an experiment. Because we had played these songs, we were dead sure that we could do them. It's just a question of could it be recorded right. We did it the old-fashioned way, I guess you would say. That's the way I used to make records anyway. I never did use earphones up until into the '80s or '90s. I don't like to use earphones.

**You feel that's a distancing thing?**

Yeah. There's a complete disconnect. You can overwhelm yourself in your own head. I've never heard anybody sing with those things in their ears effectively. They just

give you a false sense of security. A lot of us don't need earphones. I don't think Springsteen does. I know Mick doesn't. I don't think he does. But other people you see, more or less have given in. They just do it. But they ought not to do it. They don't need to. Especially if they have a good band.

Recording studios are filled with technology. They are set in their ways. And to update them means you'd have to change them back. That would be my idea of upgrading. And this will never happen. As far as I know, recording studios are booked all the time. So obviously people like all the improvements. The more technically advanced they are, the more in demand they become. The corporations have taken over. Even in the recording studio. Actually, the corporate companies have taken over American life most everywhere. Go coast to coast and you will see people all wearing the same clothes, thinking the same thoughts and eating the same food. Everything is processed.

**Let's talk about the first song on the album, *I'm A Fool To Want You*. I'm interested in how you put across the heartbreak that's on this record. It's believed that Frank Sinatra wrote it for Ava Gardner, his great love. You wrote once that the performer, the artist transmits emotion via alchemy. "I'm not feeling this," you're saying. "What I'm doing is I'm putting it across." Is that right?**

You're right, but you don't want to overstate that. Look, it all has to do with technique. Every singer has three or four or five techniques, and you can force them together in different combinations. Some of the techniques you discard along the way, and pick up others. But you do need them. It's just like anything. You have to know certain things about what you're doing that other people don't know. Singing has to do with techniques and how many you use at the same time. One alone doesn't work. There's no point to going over three. But you might interchange them whenever you feel like it. So yes, it's a bit like alchemy. It's different than being an actor where you call up sources from your own experience that you can apply to whatever Shakespeare drama you're in or whatever television show. With a song it's not quite the same way. An actor is pretending to be somebody, but a singer isn't. He's not hiding behind anything. And that's the difference. Singers today have to sing songs where there's very little emotion involved. That and the fact that they have to sing hit records from years gone by doesn't leave a lot of room for any kind of intelligent creativity. In a way, having hits buries a singer in the past. A lot of singers hide in the past because it's safer back there. If you've ever heard today's country music, you'll know what I'm talking about. Why do all these songs fall flat? I think technology has a lot to do with it. Technology is mechanical and contrary to the emotions that inform a person's life. The country music field has especially been hit hard by this turn of events.

These songs [on my album] have been written by people who went out of fashion years ago. I'm probably someone who helped put them out of fashion. But what they did is a lost art form. Just like da Vinci and Renoir and van Gogh. Nobody paints like that anymore either. But it can't be wrong to try.

So a song like *I'm A Fool To Want You* - I know that song. I can sing that song. I've felt every word in that song. I mean, I know that song. It's like I wrote it. It's easier for me to sing that song than it is to sing *Won't you come see me, Queen Jane?* At one time that wouldn't have been so. But now it is. Because *Queen Jane* might be a little bit outdated. It can't be outrun. But this song is not outdated. It has to do with human emotion, which is a constant thing. There's nothing contrived in these songs. There's not one false word in any of them. They're eternal, lyrically and musically.

### **Do you wish you wrote them?**

In a way I'm glad I didn't write any of them. I'm good with songs that I haven't written, if I like them. I already know how the song goes, so I have more freedom with it. I understand these songs. I've known them for 40 years, 50 years, maybe longer, and they make a lot of sense. So I'm not coming to them like a stranger. I've written all the songs that I feel are ... I don't know how to put this ... You travel the world, you go see different things. I like to see Shakespeare plays, so I'll go - I mean, even if it's in a different language. I don't care, I just like Shakespeare, you know. I've seen *Othello* and *Hamlet* and *The Merchant Of Venice* over the years, and some versions are better than others. Way better. It's like hearing a bad version of a song. But then somewhere else somebody has a great version.

### **I like your version of *Lucky Old Sun*. Can you talk about what drew you to this one in particular? Did you have a memory of it?**

Oh, I've never not known that song. I don't think anybody my age can tell you that they ever remember not knowing that song. I mean, it's been recorded hundreds of times. I've sung it in concert.

### **Have you?**

Yeah. But I never really got to the heart of the song until recently.

### **So how do you do that?**

Well, you cut the song down to the bone and see if it's really there for you to do. Most songs have bridges in them. A bridge is something that distracts a listener from the main verses of a song so the listener doesn't get repetitively bored. My songs don't have a lot of bridges because lyric poetry never had them. But when a song like *Autumn Leaves* presents itself, you have to decide what's real about it and what's not. Listen to how Eric Clapton does it. He sings the song, and then he plays the guitar for 10 minutes and then he sings the song again. He might even play the guitar again, I can't remember. But when you listen to his version, where do you think the importance is? Well obviously, it's in the guitar playing. He sings the song twice both the same way. And there's really no reason to do that unless you're singing the song in a different way. It's OK for Eric because he's a master guitar player and, of course, that's what he wants to feature on any song he records. But other people couldn't do it and get away with it. It's not exactly getting to the heart of what *Autumn Leaves* is

about. And as a performer, you don't get many chances to do that. And when you get the opportunity, you don't want to blow it. With all these songs you have to study the lyrics. You have to look at every one of these songs and be able to identify with them in a meaningful way. You can hardly sing these songs unless you're in them. If you want to fake it, go ahead. Fake it if you want. But I'm not that kind of singer.

### **Can we talk about some of the melodies of these songs?**

Yeah, they're incredible, aren't they? All these songs have classical music under-themes. Why? Because all these composers learned from classical music. They were composers who understood music theory, and they went to music academies. It could be a little piece of Mozart, Bach - Paul Simon did an entire song using a Bach melody - or it could be a piece of Beethoven or Liszt, Chopin, Rachmaninoff, or Stravinsky or Tchaikovsky. You can get a lot of great melodies listening to Tchaikovsky if you're a commercial songwriter or composer, and these guys did that. Not that I myself recognize where these melodies and parts came from, but I know they came from somewhere in that direction. Most of these songs are written by two people, one for the music and one for the words.

There's only one guy that I know of who did it all, and that was Irving Berlin. He wrote the melody and the lyrics. This guy was a flat-out genius. I mean, he had a gift, like, it just wouldn't stop giving, classical themes notwithstanding, because I don't think he used any. But everyone else who wrote lyrics had to depend on a piece of music. Lyricists themselves, they were a funny breed. They are not who you would think they would be. They came from all walks of life. Highbrow, lowbrow. Could be a telephone repairman, a typesetter, insurance salesman. One was a house painter, another a car mechanic. Jimmy Van Heusen was a stunt pilot. All these people knew how to keep it simple and understood ordinary daily existence, common life. And they did good.

### **Who could speak the vernacular.**

Who spoke the vernacular. Exactly. So there's nothing contrived about these songs. There's not one false word in any of them.

### **Do you like Johnny Mercer?**

I love Johnny Mercer. Yeah. I love ...

### **He did the English lyrics for *Autumn Leaves*.**

Yeah, he did. Well it doesn't surprise me. I love all of his stuff - one of the most gifted lyricists. Yeah. *Jeepers Creepers*, *Lazy Bones*, *Blues In The Night*. We do a lot of his songs at sound checks. If he was around now, I'd like to give him some of my instrumental tapes. See what he could do with them. But they might be beneath him.

### **Your renditions and these arrangements are very respectful. The arrangements are**

**almost austere, but your renditions are very respectful of these melodies - more than you are of your own songs when you perform.**

Well, I love these songs, and I'm not going to bring any disrespect to them or treat them irreverently. To trash those songs would be sacrilegious. We've all heard those songs being trashed, and we're used to it. They go by without even being heard. In some kind of ways you want to right the wrong, maybe unconsciously. But I'm not on a crusade. I think if others want to pick it up, they can and should. But if not, that's OK, too. I don't think of these songs as covers. I think of them as songs that have all been done before in many ways. The word "covers" has crept into the musical vernacular. Nobody would have understood it in the '50s or '60s. It's kind of a belittling term. What does it mean when you cover something up? You hide it. I've never understood that term. Am I doing a bunch of covers? Well, yeah, if you say so.

**So you're really uncovering.**

Exactly. That's a good point.

## **THE FANS**

**These songs will have a different audience than they originally had. Do you feel like a musical archaeologist?**

No. I just like these songs and feel I can connect with them. I would hope people will connect with them the same way that I do. I have no idea what people like or don't like. It would be presumptuous to think these songs are going to find some new audience as if they're going to appear out of nowhere. Certainly, the people who first heard these songs, like my parents and people like that, they're not with us anymore. I can't generalize who these songs are going to appeal to. Besides, when I look out from the stage, I see something different than maybe other performers do.

**What are you seeing from the stage?**

Definitely not a sea of conformity. People I cannot categorize easily. I wouldn't say there is one type of fan. I see a guy dressed up in a suit and tie next to a guy in blue jeans. I see another guy in a sport coat next to another guy wearing a T-shirt and cowboy boots. I see women sometimes in evening gowns and I see punky-looking girls. Just all kinds of people. I can see that there's a difference in character, and it has nothing to do with age. I went to an Elton John show, and it was interesting. There must have been at least three generations of people there. But they were all the same. Even the little kids. They looked just like their grandparents. It was strange. People make a fuss about how many generations follow a certain type of performer. But what does it matter if all the generations are the same? I'm content to not see a certain type of person that could be easily tracked. I don't care about age, but the adolescent youth market, I think it goes without saying, might not have the experience it takes to understand these songs and appreciate them.

**So we at AARP represent people who are 50 and older. The magazine reaches 35 million readers.**

Well, a lot of those readers are going to like this record. If it were up to me, I'd give you the records for nothing, and you give them to every [reader of your] magazine. I think a lot of your readers will identify with these songs.

**The songs on this album conjure a kind of romantic love that is nearly antique, because there's no longer much resistance in romance. People date and they climb into bed. That sweet, painful pining of the '40s and '50s doesn't exist anymore. Do you think these songs will fall on younger ears as corny?**

You tell me. I mean, I don't know why they would, but what's the word "corny" mean exactly? I've heard it but don't use it much. It's like "tacky." I don't say that word either. There's just no power in those words. These songs, take 'em or leave 'em, if nothing else, are songs of great virtue. That's what they are. If they sound trite and corny to somebody, well so much for that. But people's lives today are filled on so many levels with vice and the trappings of it. Ambition, greed and selfishness all have to do with vice. Sooner or later, you have to see through it or you don't survive. We don't see the people that vice destroys. We just see the glamour of it on a daily basis - everywhere we look, from billboard signs to movies, to newspapers, to magazines. We see the destruction of human life and the mockery of it, everywhere we look. These songs are anything but that. Romance never does go out of fashion. It's radical. Maybe it's out of step with the current media culture. If it is, it is.

**What is the best song you've ever written about heartbreak and loss?**

I think *Love Sick* [from 1997's *Time Out Of Mind*].

**A fellow Minnesotan, F. Scott Fitzgerald, said famously, "There are no second acts in American life." You are a man who has probably had four or five second acts. Poet, Voice of a Generation, troubadour, rocker and now crooner!**

Yeah [Laughs]. I know. Right. Well, look, he said that in a day and age where he was probably speaking the truth.

**You once said that as a folk artist you came into the music business through the side door.**

I did?

**You did. And I think I know what you meant, because nobody thought folk music was going to amount to anything in the music business at the time. Now here you are with this grand parade of iconic American songs. Are you finally coming in through the front door?**

I would say that's pretty right on. You just have to keep going to find that thing that

lets you in the door, if you actually want to get in the door. Sometimes in life when that day comes and you're given the key, you throw it away. You find that whatever you were looking for your entire life isn't where you thought it was. Folk music came at exactly the right time in my life. It wouldn't have happened 10 years later, and 10 years earlier I wouldn't have known what kind of songs those were. They were just so different than popular music. But it came at the right time, so I went that way. Then folk music became relegated to the sidelines. It either became commercial or the Beatles killed it. Maybe it couldn't have gone on anyway. But actually, in this day and age, it still is a vibrant form of music, and many people sing and play it much better than we ever did. It's just not what you would call part of the pop realm. I had gotten in there at a time when nobody else was there or knew it even existed, so I had the whole landscape to myself. I went into songwriting. I figured I had to - I couldn't be that hellfire rock 'n' roller. But I could write hellfire lyrics.

When I was growing up, Billy Graham was very popular. He was the greatest preacher and evangelist of my time - that guy could save souls and did. I went to two or three of his rallies in the '50s or '60s. This guy was like rock 'n' roll personified - volatile, explosive. He had the hair, the tone, the elocution - when he spoke, he brought the storm down. Clouds parted. Souls got saved, sometimes thirty or forty thousand of them. If you ever went to a Billy Graham rally back then, you were changed forever. There's never been a preacher like him. He could fill football stadiums before anybody. He could fill Giants Stadium more than even the Giants football team. Seems like a long time ago. Long before Mick Jagger sang his first note or Bruce strapped on his first guitar - that's some of the part of rock 'n' roll that I retained. I had to. I saw Billy Graham in the flesh and heard him loud and clear.

## **THE PROCESS**

**A lot of your newer songs deal with aging. You once said that people don't retire, they fade away, they run out of steam. And now you're 73, you're a great-grandfather.**

Look, you get older. Passion is a young man's game, OK? Young people can be passionate. Older people gotta be more wise. I mean, you're around awhile, you leave certain things to the young and you don't try to act like you're young. You could really hurt yourself.

**In a period around 1966, you went into seclusion for more than a year, and there was much speculation about your motives. But it was to protect your family, wasn't it?**

Totally. That's right.

**And I think that people didn't quite want to understand that, because your idiosyncratic view of the world as an artist made them think you were an idiosyncratic person, but in reality you were a typical dad who was trying to protect his kids.**

Totally. I gave up my art to do that.

**And was that painful?**

Totally frustrating and painful, of course, because that intuitive gift - which for me went musically - had carried me so far. I did do that, yeah, and it hurt to have to do it. But I didn't have a choice.

**Now your life is largely spent on the road: a hundred nights a year. I read that your grandmother once told you that happiness is not the road to anything. She said it is the road.**

My grandmother was a wonderful lady.

**You obviously get great joy and connection from the people who come to see you.**

It's not unlike a sportsman who's on the road a lot. Roger Federer, the tennis player, I mean, you know, he's working most of the year. Like maybe 250 days a year, every year, year in and year out. I mean, I think that's more than B.B. King does. So it's relative. I mean, yeah, you must go where the people are. You can't bring them to where you are unless you have a contract to play in Vegas. But happiness - are we talking about happiness?

**Yeah.**

OK, a lot of people say there is no happiness in this life, and certainly there's no permanent happiness. But self-sufficiency creates happiness. Happiness is a state of bliss. Actually, it never crosses my mind. Just because you're satisfied one moment - saying yes, it's a good meal, makes me happy - well, that's not going to necessarily be true the next hour. Life has its ups and downs, and time has to be your partner, you know? Really, time is your soul mate. Children are happy. But they haven't really experienced ups and downs yet. I'm not exactly sure what happiness even means, to tell you the truth. I don't know if I personally could define it.

**Have you touched it?**

Well, we all do.

**Held it?**

We all do at certain points, but it's like water - it slips through your hands. As long as there's suffering, you can only be so happy. How can a person be happy if he has misfortune? Does money make a person happy? Some wealthy billionaire who can buy 30 cars and maybe buy a sports team, is that guy happy? What then would make him happier? Does it make him happy giving his money away to foreign countries? Is there more contentment in that than giving it here to the inner cities and creating jobs? Nowhere does it say that one of the government's responsibilities is to create

jobs. That is a false premise. But if you like lies, go ahead and believe it. The government's not going to create jobs. It doesn't have to. People have to create jobs, and these big billionaires are the ones who can do it. We don't see that happening. We see crime and inner cities exploding, with people who have nothing to do but meander around, turning to drink and drugs, into killers and jailbirds. They could all have work created for them by all these hotshot billionaires. For sure, that would create a lot of happiness. Now, I'm not saying they have to - I'm not talking about communism - but what do they do with their money? Do they use it in virtuous ways? If you have no idea what virtue is all about, look it up in a Greek dictionary. There's nothing namby-pamby about it.

### **So they should be moving their focus?**

Well, I think they should, yeah, because there are a lot of things that are wrong in America and especially in the inner cities that they could solve. Those are dangerous grounds, and they don't have to be. There are good people there, but they've been oppressed by lack of work. Those people can all be working at something. These multibillionaires, and there seem to be more of them every day, can create industries right here in the inner cities of America. But no one can tell them what to do. God's got to lead them.

### **And productive work is a kind of salvation in your view? To feel worth and pride in what you do?**

Absolutely.

**Let me talk to you for a minute about your gift. There are artists like George Balanchine, the choreographer, who felt that he was a servant to his muse. Somebody else like Picasso felt that he was the boss in the creative process. How have you dealt with your own gift over the years? I mean your songwriting, your inspiration, your creativity.**

[Laughter]

### **That makes you laugh?**

Well, I might trade places with Picasso if I could, creatively speaking. I'd like to think I was the boss of my creative process, too, and I could just do anything I wanted whenever I wanted and it would all be on a grand scale. But of course, that's not true. Like Sinatra, there was only one Picasso. As far as George the choreographer, I'm more inclined to feel the same way that he does about what I do. It's not easy to pin down the creative process.

### **Is it elusive?**

It totally is. It totally is. It's uncontrollable. It makes no sense in literal terms. I wish I could enlighten you, but I can't - just sound stupid trying. But I'll try. It starts like this.

What kind of song do I need to play in my show? What don't I have? It always starts with what I don't have instead of doing more of the same. I need all kinds of songs - fast ones, slow ones, minor key, ballads, rumbas - and they all get juggled around during a live show. I've been trying for years to come up with songs that have the feeling of a Shakespearean drama, so I'm always starting with that. Once I can focus in on something, I just play it in my mind until an idea comes from out of nowhere, and it's usually the key to the whole song. It's the idea that matters. The idea is floating around long before me. It's like electricity was around long before Edison harnessed it. Communism was around before Lenin took over. Pete Townshend thought about *Tommy* for years before he actually wrote any songs for it. So creativity has a lot to do with the main idea. Inspiration is what comes when you are dealing with the idea. But inspiration won't invite what's not there to begin with.

**You've been generous to take up all of these questions.**

I found the questions really interesting. The last time I did an interview, the guy wanted to know about everything except the music. Man, I'm just a musician, you know? People have been doing that to me since the '60s - they ask questions like they would ask a medical doctor or a psychiatrist or a professor or a politician. Why? Why are you asking me these things?

**What do you ask a musician about?**

Music! Exactly.



2014

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## **Bob Dylan, bizarre computer salesman: "He's being played as a genial grandpa, rather than as a rebel."**

Dylan's strange IBM ad makes one thing clear - any line between commercialism and rock artistry has evaporated

*The once reclusive, still-baffling Bob Dylan has shown up on a commercial for IBM's Watson [a talking computer]. Dylan has made commercials in the past, but this one is strange for all kinds of reasons. AdWeek has called it "Advertising's Oddest Pairing." In the course of it, Dylan speaks to an artificial intelligence system about his work, jokes about writing a song together, and strolls off-screen the same way he arrived, Telecaster in hand.*

*There was a time when rock musicians kept a distance from commercialism even while selling their work through record companies. More recently, with sales of recorded music plummeting, many musicians have come to depend on licensing for television, movies, commercials, product placement and the rest. Does the Dylan bit tell us anything about the relationship between rock music and commerce? We spoke to Ira Robbins, the long-time New York-based rock critic who edited the punk-affiliated Trouser Press magazine and its guides to New Wave and alternative rock. The interview has been lightly edited for clarity.*

This isn't the first commercial Dylan has made, but it's struck some people as dissonant or odd. What did it seem like to you? Is it just another chapter of Dylan's strange engagement with commerce?

*Dylan in his old age has been more unpredictable than he was as Dylan the young firebrand he was in my youth. Seeing him pop up in surprising places is almost commonplace. He hasn't made an obnoxious habit of it, but he's done enough on commercials and movies and other things you once would have thought of him disinclined toward, but no longer. Given his extremely awkward and un-actor-like performances in the films he's starred in, he's actually really good in this. He seems really natural.*

Is it fair to say that the tension between rock 'n' roll and television commercials - outright commercialism in general - is over? Is that an old hang up, one that started to fray when Dylan went electric at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival? Is there any antagonism left between rock music and commercialism?

*I would agree with everything you just said, except I wouldn't connect it to Newport particularly. I don't think that was a commercial moment. I think that was an artistic moment. But absolutely - there is nobody left alive except*

*people of my generation and older who even find anything to question about the notion of commercialism and rock being completely overlapped. It isn't that people have changed their opinion about it, it's that the idea that there's something to question in that has completely evaporated. We've lost that battle; we've stopped fighting it.*



It makes you wonder: Dylan has sold lots of records over the years, he's been on this endless tour... Is it conceivable that he needs the money so badly that he has to do a TV commercial? Or does this strike you as something he might have done for fun?

*Ah - neither. I've given some thought to this, because it comes up with all these aging rock icons. Why do they continue to do what they do? Like the Rolling Stones - it just can't be that the Rolling Stones need money, after doing what, five or ten tours over the last twenty years, each of which has netted each member of the band several million dollars. Not to mention the fact that they clearly have other revenue streams. Does Dylan need the money? I seriously doubt it. But starting back with Fred Goodman's book *Mansion On The Hill*, the notion that Dylan had a serious interest in accumulating wealth became pretty apparent - something that had never occurred to me as a fan before... That he likes being rich, that he will go out of his way to be paid for things. That was sort of a surprise to me. But I integrated that into my understanding of things and am no longer surprised that he does things solely for money. You and I don't know; for all we know, he could have a deal with Sara [Dylan's first wife] where he pays her \$10 million a year. Who knows? So I think the idea that*

*Dylan wants money is now a given. Did he do it for fun? I'm pretty sure he didn't do it for fun. They obviously made it fun for him; it's a cute little commercial. And presumably there's more to come; I can't imagine that's the extent of their relationship. But I certainly understand that Dylan is an industry and he likes adding to his coffers.*



I guess the other thing that will be dissonant for some people is Dylan - a figure we still associate with the '60s - engaging with digital technology. Dylan has done a commercial for Victoria's Secret, and for Chrysler, but this is a kind of technology that didn't exist for most of Dylan's career. I understand why IBM would want some of Dylan's rebel cool, but it seems like a funny choice for him.

*You raise an interesting question - what's in it for either side? I'm not sure Dylan carries any rebel cool in 2015. He's an elderly man crooning sophisticated Tin Pan Alley standards for an audience that's older than AARP age... If you want rebel cool, you get Jack White. You get someone 30 or 40 years younger who has done something rebellious in the last couple of decades.*

*I think from IBM's side, they're getting a venerable institution with instant recognition among a base of viewers who probably have money. Dylan is not attracting young fans anymore, but young fans are not what you are trying to attract for whatever Watson is selling. You're trying to get through to people who control multi-million dollar budgets, as opposed to people who have \$2,000 to spend on a laptop. From Dylan's point of view, I don't think it matters who he's doing it for. And his role in the commercial is sort of as the bemused observer of technology. He's talking to a machine that tells him it knows how to sing... I think he's being played as a genial grandpa, rather than as a rebel of any sort.*

The computer tells Dylan that the key themes of his songs are "time passes and love fades." Is that a pretty fair description of his body of work?

*I'm not sure I need a TV commercial to help me understand someone whose music I've been deeply affected by since I was eleven years old. Now that you say it again, I'm not sure - is that what Dylan's songs are about? Time passing and love fades? No, I wouldn't say that at all. Certainly as Dylan's gotten older, he's gotten more nostalgic and reflective - the [last?] half dozen albums are an old guy thinking back on his life. What seventy year old musician is going to write about what's going on in the streets today or how they're looking forward to 2017? If that's an accurate observation, it's entirely a facile and simplistic one.*

It doesn't describe the early protest records, or *Highway 61 Revisited*...

*... Or even *Desire* or *Slow Train Coming*, which was about faith. I would venture that faith would have to be included as a watchword of Dylan's music in a number of different iterations... If you're putting together an ad campaign, faith is not really a word you want to come up, for an audience that may have different ideas of what it means.*

Of the major rock artists, Dylan stands out: He tours all the time, and has done a few commercials, but he's remained reclusive in some ways. Just how press shy is he? We don't see him in interviews and magazine covers as often as a lot of other major stars.

*That's true. But I think *Chronicles* was the Rubicon for him. I read *Chronicles*, Volume 1 and thought, "Oh my God, he's actually done things I didn't know about and he's willing to talk about them!" Whether that book is a 100 per cent accurate reflection of his life or a highly selective one, it was amazing... I kept thinking, *The Buddha Speaks*. It was like seeing a statue come to life. Ever since then, he's been, in his own enigmatic, self-amused way, sharing bits and pieces of himself. He did the film with Scorsese, and more interviews. In the '70s there was just no getting to him. No way... Even in the '60s, when he was visible and voluble, there was no way of making use of anything he said - it was all whimsical or contradictory or complicated or just paradoxical. He doesn't seem as self-protective as he used to be. At the same time, he's not out there doing the promos the way Mick Jagger would if he had a new project. The funny thing about the commercial to me was how much it seemed like 2001 and Hal. The computer voice was just human enough to not seem mechanical, but mechanical enough to not seem human. I kept waiting for it to say: "Gee, Bob, I can't really help you with that."*

Scott Timberg, *Salon*, 9 October 2015

## SCARLET TOWN



In *Chronicles D* called the world of folk music *a different ... higher republic*. It's the world in which Bob Dylan (as opposed to Zimmerman) was born and raised and it's the world of which, in *Scarlet Town*, he sings. It's a world arcane (under the hill) and implacable (where "cryin' won't do no good"), a world governed by its own now hopelessly outmoded morality (Uncles Tom and Bill), that yet - in contrast to the prosaic compromised material realm beyond - at least still *has* a morality, offering the life-affirming possibility of existence free of spiritual taint. While melancholy (courtesy of doom-beset beggars and lovers gentle and true) remains its principal stock-in-trade, yet all life, both human (the singer and his whore) and mythic (Sweet William, Little Boy Blue) is embraced. Ambition (to touch the garment) goes unrewarded (its hem torn). Cupidity and graft have no place. This world deals with the eternal verities of Man and the fallibility of men, their troubles fought now, as ever, home or away, with the current *drug du jour*. It's an adamantine world that can't be suborned or subverted, and eclectic, open to all prepared to absorb its lore, live by its mores, embrace its code. And while marginalised, rendered ever more remote by the relentless, oppressive, corrosive grind of twenty-first century "life", which D's song considers too, it's inviolable. For it's a world of the imagination, of the mind, of that potentially safe haven of the soul, behind a door through which many peek, some step but all too few flourish.

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## HEARTS OF FIRE



In 1986-7, Bob Dylan touched bottom. Creatively bereft, he reached a personal and professional nadir, turning in some of the worst performances and releasing some of the poorest records of his career. In his 2004 memoir *Chronicles Volume One* he describes himself at this period of his life as "over the hill ... going through the motions". The very man, then, surely, to cast in a feature film as a "washed-up rock and roller"?

Written by Scott Richardson and rewritten by Joe (*Jagged Edge*, *Basic Instinct*) Eszterhas, *Hearts Of Fire* tells of a love triangle between reclusive rock dinosaur Billy Parker, big-haired Telecaster-toting wannabe Molly McGuire and jaded New Wave pop idol James Colt. Purpose-written as a starring vehicle for a rock icon whose name alone would lend cachet and hopefully boost ticket sales, the Parker part was allegedly first offered to Mick Jagger, then, after he declined, to Dylan. The involvement of Richard (*Return Of The Jedi*, *Jagged Edge*) Marquand offered the prospect of directorial savvy. Rupert (*Another Country*) Everett was cast as Colt and unknown 25 year old New York singer Fiona Flanagan (billed as Fiona) took the part of Molly. The film began shooting in the autumn of 1986.

The omens were never good. No one who has sat through Dylan's musically stirring but dramatically banal *Renaldo and Clara* will need to be told that his acting is even worse than his painting and the fact is, if you want someone to play drunk on screen, you don't hire a drunk but an *actor*. So, too, if you want a washed-up rock star convincingly portrayed, it's not life experience that counts (where late-eighties Dylan would score heavily) but the ability to assume and carry a part (where, late-eighties or otherwise, he does not).

In the August 1986 press conference held to announce the production, a monosyllabic Dylan showed no sign of commitment to the cause: *It's just a movie*, he said, and *It's all a joke*. Yet, if the Q&A featured in recent tour programmes is to be believed, his enthusiasm had not always been lacking:

Q: *What about the movie Hearts Of Fire?*

A: *What about it?*

Q: *How did you get involved in that? Did you ever see it?*

A: *No. I don't think it was ever released here.*

Q: *How did you come to be in it? It wasn't a very good film.*

A: *No, I don't think so. I don't see how it could have been. The way the script came to me was through Joan Hylar from the William Morris Agency. She said to look at the role of Billy Parker, that the director had me in mind to play that part.*

Q: *The director?*

A: *Yeah - the director Richard Marquand.*

Q: *So you read the script?*

A: *Yeah.*

Q: *So what did you think after you read it?*

A: *I thought it was a terrible script, a pointless story. There was nothing about it that rang true at all.*

Q: *So why did you do it, then?*

A: *I did it for the money. I mean, why else would I do it? They probably paid me as much as they paid De Niro or Pacino to play a role. I mean, how could I not?*

Q: *Did you take any acting lessons before they started shooting?*

A: *No. I probably should have, but it wouldn't have done any good. The story made no sense.*

Q: *Had you ever heard of Fiona before the movie?*

A: *No, but she and Marquand came to see me to talk me into doing the role.*

Q: *And you said yes?*

A: *Yeah, I said I was interested.*

Q: *What did you think of Fiona?*

A: *Well, nothing, really. She was just a clear-eyed young girl. I assumed she must be a helluva singer because they were making this big movie about her. I assumed she could act, too. You know, like some undiscovered star or something. Just because I hadn't heard of her didn't mean anything.*

Q: *How did Marquand define your role?*

A: *Well, it was all in the script. There wasn't much to define. You took it at face value. It talked about a washed up rock and roller, or a retired one, or someone who was jaded by the business and stuff like that. There wasn't any back story to the guy or anything.*

Q: *Did you feel excitement about doing it?*

A: *Excitement? Not really. I couldn't identify with any of the characters in the movie at all. Definitely not the guy they wanted me to play. Marquand said that he could easily guide me through the role but that didn't mean much one way or another. I did meet them though and had gone through the motions of listening but it just seemed so unreal. I wasn't anticipating anything but then Joan got a hold of me later and said that they desperately wanted me to play the part and that the money was ridiculous.*

Q: *Were there rehearsals?*

A: *Oh yeah, in London where it was filmed there were some. The only guy that had any acting experience was Rupert [Everett]. He was the only real actor on the set.*

Q: *Did he help you at all?*

*A: Are you kidding? We stayed drunk most of the time.*

*Q: Really? It was that bad?*

*A: Yeah, well it was a terrible script and we had no control over it. They were going to shoot it word for word.*



[Rupert Everett as James Colt](#)

*Q: Did you try to change it at all - like any of the dialog?*

*A: Oh yeah, we had tried that earlier, months before filming began. Me and Elliot Roberts, who was representing me at the time, had gotten Marquand and Joe Eszterhas, the screenwriter, to come and see us out on the road. I was playing a tour with Tom Petty at the time. We wanted to change some of the lines and Elliot and I had tried on our own, but we realized if we changed some of my lines the lines of other characters would have to be changed. All we were trying to do was make the movie more understandable. It was fun trying to do it, but it was too complicated for either of us to actually pull off. We were just making a comedy out of it. We were hoping that Eszterhas could see our point and maybe rip the script apart, add a murder scene, some sex scenes or even a car chase. Anything to make the script come alive.*

Q: *What was the response?*

A: *Oh, I don't know. I can't really remember. But I think it was a couple of blank looks. Marquand was a Welshman, very proper. When he spoke, he sounded like Richard Burton. He was an elegant guy. Eszterhas couldn't have been more different. They called him the Mad Hungarian. He had written Basic Instinct, Flashdance and some other stuff, hit movies. Eszterhas didn't look like anything you'd think a screenwriter would look like. He looked like a Hell's Angel. Like he just roared through the hallway of the hotel on a Harley. It was hard to imagine these guys even being in the same room together. I don't know what they thought of our little suggestions. But they didn't change anything.*

Q: *What would you have wanted them to change? Do you remember?*

A: *Oh, not really. Elliot and I had kicked it around a little bit and thought that maybe some character adjustments might be in order. Like the character that Rupert played.*

Q: *James Colt.*

A: *Yeah. James Colt. That was his name? God, you know this movie better than me. Yeah, Elliot and I thought that this character was based on a David Bowie type, so we thought why not make him overtly gay? You know, like put his cards on the table. It would have made his character much deeper. And others would have related to him in a different way.*

Q: *What about the character Fiona played?*

A: *Yeah, who did she play?*

Q: *Molly.*

A: *Yeah, that's right, Molly. We dreamed up a few things for that character, too. We thought maybe if we gave her a back story like she'd been sexually molested as a child by a family member, it would have added a little bit more to her character, made her innocence not seem so innocent when she played scenes with either Rupert or me.*

Q: *You mean Billy Parker.*

A: *Yeah, Billy Parker. We dealt with him in a more primitive way. Like maybe his back story could have been something like when he was a big star, whenever that was, he married his 13 year old cousin and had fallen from grace, out of favour with both the record industry and the record buying public.*

Q: *You're joking, right?*

A: *No, I'm not joking. That would have given him a genuine reason to be so pissed off and jaded or whatever they expected him to be.*

Q: *Your ideas fell flat ...*

A: *Yeah I don't think they heard. They just looked right through us. Basically I don't think they had any notion to change anything. They liked their movie the way it was. They just came out to see us out of courtesy, really.*

Q: *But you went ahead and did it anyway.*

A: *Yeah. I mean, well, why not? It was the only way I was going to get to hear Fiona sing, you know what I'm saying?*

Q: *I see. Do you think the studio had high hopes for this movie?*

A: *No, no. It was some kind of death wish for somebody. The director himself, he died right around the opening night premiere of the film in London. That always seemed strange to me.*

"Some kind of death wish for somebody ..." In view of Dylan's psychic state at the time, it's interesting to speculate on who (or what) exactly he had in mind. On *ER* in 2013, Brian Hamilton Smith posted this concerning Dylan's involvement in *Hearts Of Fire*:

*I think Dylan was deliberately debasing himself somehow. There is something [in his participation] that smacks of public masochism. I don't believe for a moment he was consciously doing this, but is there perhaps a point when you're slipping down a slope when you just give up fighting it and resign yourself to hitting the bottom? Once you get to the bottom, you can't get any lower, and maybe in taking this part in this movie Dylan was*

*accelerating the slide? ... A couple of years later his comeback album was called Oh Mercy, the title of which I always took to mean "Thank God, I've made it through the worst times and survived."*

While it's true that the enigmatic Bob Zimmerman has played the part of Bob Dylan virtually his entire adult life, and done it wonderfully well, the ability to do it at a second remove - i.e. to have his part play a part - has always been beyond him, perhaps because of the inherent insincerity involved, or who knows why? His casting as Parker must in any event have raised many an industry eyebrow. But director Marquand, stoutly talked up the thespian chops of his star, telling *The Telegraph's* John Bauldie:

*He has enormous internal strength and truth ... I realised very quickly that his timing was different from an actor's timing. I mean there's a certain kind of a film timing - we talk in beats, and everyone knows what a beat is - it has a certain rhythm to it. And I've had a tendency in the films I've made to try and break that rhythm ... And I was very interested in the way that Bob worked and the way that he did things because his rhythm was never there on the beat ... The man is extraordinary in that way, constantly a surprise. And it's something that Robert De Niro, or in his day Brando, or now Jack Nicholson would give their eye teeth to achieve in every damn take they do. It's what they want to do too, but they have to use technique to get there whereas Bob is doing it out of some kind of natural flow that he has, and it really is quite extraordinary, quite breathtaking.*

How could any actor, never mind Bob Dylan, never mind late-'80s Bob Dylan, live up to such intimidating and extravagantly deluded claims? But the film was made and, of course, died a miserable death on both sides of the Atlantic, running for just a fortnight in the UK and, on the back of that pointer, going straight to video in the U.S. Received opinion within the Dylan community consistently condemns it as the pits, with pejorative terms like "car crash", "train wreck", "risible tripe" and "Farts on Hire" pronouncing verdict (guilty) and sentence (oblivion) in one. Of course, having never seen more than a few YouTube moments of it, I should have known better than to blindly accept such judgements. Then again, having heard no more than a few minutes of *Shadows In The Night* I have a firmly entrenched poor opinion of that too. Fools rush in ...

Anyway, today, almost thirty years on from its making, an interest in Rupert Everett brought me to watch *Hearts Of Fire* for the first time, and for all those reasons above, I confess to approaching the experience not with the

uncluttered, unbiased open mind it deserved but with mild anxiety, not to say trepidation. What a surprise, then, to discover a modest and unambitious but coherent and (hold tight) half-decent picture. Okay, so it's no *Gone With The Wind*, and not the deepest ever meditation on celebrity and fame (though I liked Bob's line *The bigger you are, the bigger the trap*). You also get a keen sense that it must have been a challenge to edit, for Bob's attention span in front of camera probably wasn't up to extended takes of anything, but the weaknesses I perceive have nothing to do with his performance, or Everett's for that matter. Maybe the budget wouldn't stretch to a more persuasive leading lady, and, despite her pretentious name, Fiona tries gamely enough - but her transformation from callow, charisma-free child-woman to headlining rock diva within the twinkling of an eye is just too much to swallow. (Clinton Heylin: *Flanagan generates as much sexual charge as a blow-up doll with a puncture, while exuding all the onscreen presence of an ex-parrot.*) Nor does the film's music (which Dylan had undertaken to write and which you might expect a "music" film to major in) ever struggle past the tawdry and mediocre - although, in view of the vacuousness of the business the three leads were communally engaged in, this "fault" could be seen as unintentionally fitting - though it doesn't make for a better film.



In his entertaining 2006 memoir *Red Carpets And Other Banana Skins*, Rupert Everett recalls time spent with his hard-drinking co-star:

*Bob looked as though someone had sucked all the fluids out of him. He was hunched and crumpled under a wistful afro. His skin was parchment, and the famous nose seemed to stretch his face to breaking point. What was he doing here? He knew he was taking part in a piece of unmitigated rubbish. His hangdog eyes said it all, as Richard the director clambered onto the make-up bus in the morning and regaled him with ideas for the scene, peppered with all the words he thought Bob would appreciate.*

*"Great idea, man!" he would say, and heartily slap Bob on the back, nearly winding him. Bob listened, as solemnly as a condemned man. He nodded his head and stumbled back to his trailer, where he often fell into a deep sleep from which he could not be woken. Bob lived in a parallel universe. He was with us, but not with us. He didn't go to bed like a normal person. He slept for a few hours and then pottered and then slept again. The twenty-four-hour structure that the rest of us timed our lives by had been left behind years ago, which meant that he might just have gone to bed at the time of his morning call. If so, it would be hard to move him. He would come into the trailer and collapse into the make-up chair, like a wild animal that had been shot with a tranquilliser.*

*But we all adored him. He was like a pixie, scrunched up, his matchstick legs crossed, tendrils of smoke snaking from his mouth through the afro, like mist rising off the top of a jungle. It was a cold autumn and so he often wore a huge fur-trimmed parka, his head peeking out from the shadowy interior of the hood, his drainpipe trousers and cowboy boots clip-clopping like a puppet's legs underneath. He had beautiful hands, twenty years younger than the rest of his body. Maybe he was there because he needed to keep connecting, and being on a movie set was the easiest place to do it. Getting locked inside a celebrity stronghold, an ivory tower, is the death of creativity, and the unhappy lot of the rich and famous. They lose themselves in the quest for security, but Dylan was the real thing. I think he lived to create. At the same time he was also desperately retiring. On the film set he could interact and somehow keep himself from calcifying.*

*He never said a bad word about anyone. Actually he never said a word. But he listened and watched and nothing escaped him. On the odd occasions when he did talk, it sounded like a lyric. He spoke just as he sang, and "Where's the toilet?" sounded as interesting as "Lay across my big brass bed." But he had a hard time remembering his lines, and it was touching to be with him during a scene.*

*It is hard to describe to a civilian the weird pressure of living inside the bubble of a film crew. They sit right there on top of you. Your every move is scrutinised. If you want to have secret thoughts, then they must be really secret, because you are wired for sound and someone is always looking at you through a lens.*

*Once the clapper slams and the director shouts "Action!" there is a strange electric atmosphere that contracts your chest ever so slightly and shoots adrenaline around your body. If you begin to forget your lines, there is no escape, no moment to collect yourself, and you are liable to be carried off by a wave of panic.*

*I don't know whether Bob learnt the lines beforehand. Possibly it never occurred to him. They always look so simple there on the clean white page at home. Probably he thought he could wing it once he got onto the set. But actually he just drowned in front of the camera, floundering on the open sea of one short line. This genius, one of the only authentic American heroes, was sitting there in a pool of light like a frying egg, trying to focus his splintering brain on Joe's inane rock-star banter. But it constantly eluded him. The camera boys thrust tape measures at him. The sound boys asked him to speak up. Richard asked for more energy, and there he sat, like a crushed mutt on an operating table or a rabbit frozen in the headlights, and we were all moved. Even the grips and sparks - "a hardened lot" - were silent. They didn't want him to see them watching him, so they walked about with their heads bowed in respect, like men at a funeral.*

*The production moved to Toronto in November to film all the big concert scenes. Winter had set in and it began to snow. We worked in the Maple Leaf Stadium, and played to the sixty thousand fans of some other band who let us shoot for an hour each night. There is nothing more exciting than filming in a real environment; you are acting, but everything else is true. It gives the actor a chance to inhabit his role without even thinking twice, blurring the division between reality and art. We were flanked by platoons of bodyguards. Roadies ran around the stage like mice at our feet. Our trailers were parked at the back of the stadium and anyone who came into them needed a sheaf of passes. The baying crowd literally shook your bones to the marrow. It was like living in a volcano. Suddenly Bob was in his element, unruffled like a duck in a thunderstorm. "You gotta stand up to them when you get on stage," he advised, "otherwise they just wash over you."*

*We all piled into his trailer before the show and got incredibly drunk. Bob strummed on his guitar. Assistants came and went. Richard dropped in. By the time we got to the wings we were in extremely high spirits, but Bob was too wobbly to make it up the very steep steps onto the stage. We all held our breath as we*

*watched him trying to do it. Our tiny pixie teetered on the third step before half climbing, half falling backwards to the ground, then steeling himself for a second try. He turned around to see us all laughing and, shrugging his shoulders, beckoned for the girls to go and join him. Pat and Meinir pointed at themselves with question marks written across their faces. Bob nodded. They gingerly crept into the no man's land between the stage and the wings, and he put an arm around each girl's shoulders, and so Pat Hay and Meinir Brock made an entrance with Bob Dylan onto the stage of a gigantic stadium. As the three of them lurched into the limelight, like three drunks leaving a pub, a roar went up from the crowd. I don't think I have ever laughed so much. The girls stood there like shy three-year-olds at a birthday party and then began to shuffle backwards into the shadows where they belonged.*



Though shot and originally released in widescreen, circulating video copies are not

*By now Richard was on a short fuse. He had already developed a crippling pain in his left leg that made him limp and forced him to walk with a stick. When he saw Pat and Meinir on stage in front of sixty thousand fans he threw the stick to the ground in fury. It hit the continuity lady in the back. He stormed over to Bob between takes. His face was purple. All his habitual tact and diplomacy evaporated and months of frustration poured out into the deaf ears of our star. Now he may have been crumpled and hunched, but no one raised their voice to Bob Dylan. "I always have girls take me on to the stage," he said. And that was the end of that. The girls were called back, they knew the shit was going to hit the fan, but what could they do, and on take after take they had to push Bob up the stairs and give him a comical final shove onto the stage.*

*For my entrance, I arrived down a staircase from the back. Searchlights slashed across me, and the crowd went berserk. They were paid to, but I didn't care. I've never been fussy about paying and I got an erection. I began to sing my set to playback. Fans jumped up onto the stage and tried to rape me. I just stood there as roadies beat them to a pulp at my feet and dragged them off. I was nearing orgasm. I finished the first number. "Good evening, Chicago!" I shouted and my voice bounced around the arena as flashlights exploded like stars. I had come a long way since that other live performance in Camberwell. I introduced Bob, he came on and we played a song together. We must have been an odd couple. He was tiny and I was a giant, but I didn't care, even though I had to bend double to sing along with him at his mike. It was the most fun I have ever had filming.*



*The next morning there was hell to pay. The studio had seen the rushes, and could tell that Bob was having difficulty getting onto the stage. When they heard that his girlfriends were none other than the make-up lady and the hairdresser, they had a meltdown. They threatened to fire the girls, and Bob and I were given headmasterly lectures by Richard and the producer. We re-shot the offending scene and Bob mounted the scaffold alone this time.*

*In a way Bob reminded me of Andy Warhol. You could never be certain whether he was really vacant or just playing vacant. Like Andy, he had perfected the art of being the still centre of a raging storm. Whether it was a contrivance or not, who knew? Probably not even him, at this stage.*

*On the last day, we shot a scene in a limo. The car was parked in the dark studio. Bob and I sat inside. A burly grip stood at each corner and bumped the car up and down to simulate movement. Others swept the beams of hand-held lamps across the windows to look like traffic. Someone else ran in with traffic lights, red, yellow and green, and another man stood on a ladder with a hose and made rain. (This is often how car interiors are shot in the movies and it is an eccentric sight: portly men running around a parked car with lamps, being hosed down by another man up a ladder.)*

*Bob was his usual self in the car. Squeezed into the jump seat were Richard, the camera operator and the soundman. It was fairly crowded. We played the scene over and over. We chatted between takes. We had drinks in the scene and they were constantly refilled, the real thing, needless to say. The props guys who were in charge of administering drinks didn't even ask. Apple juice was for babies. Bob dozed off, sinking into himself like a parrot. We must have been there for a couple of hours. When we finished the first assistant opened the car door. Bob climbed out. He looked around, squinting. "Where's the hotel?" he said, apparently confused, thinking he had been driven home. Or did he? Either way, the whole set exploded with mirth. Bob shrugged his shoulders and shuffled off into the gloom wrapped in the giant parka.*

*That night he made a rare exception and came out to dinner in a restaurant. His assistant was a lovely Australian girl who always walked beside him with her hand in front of his face if there was a camera around. She was our bridge to Bob. We toasted and reminisced, knowing that we would probably never see him again. We all longed to say how much we had loved being with him, but of course none of us did. But I think he knew. After the meal we awkwardly hugged, and he shuffled off back to some undisclosed location and that was that.*

*On the plane trip back to London, Pat and I somehow ended up sitting next to each other for take-off, and we were all given*

*official warnings by the airline when we got off the plane the next morning. Our whole crew was on the flight and we sat around drinking and laughing all night, infuriating the other travellers. We were still at it as the exhausted air hostess glumly announced, "Doors to manual," the next morning.*

*I never saw Bob again. He didn't attend the bloodbath of a premiere in London. The film brought my career to a standstill, but I wouldn't have missed it for anything. I had played the Maple Leaf Stadium with Bob Dylan, and the Albert Hall with Julie Andrews, all in the same year. Things were never going to be any better. It was time to get out.*

*As for poor Richard Marquand: a few months later, he was getting out of his car at Heathrow airport, where he was meeting his daughter. He had a massive heart attack and died on the way to the hospital. The movie business is a strange affair, demanding total dedication from its lovers, although it gives none in return. Health, home and humanity often fly out the window during the making of a film. There are no days off for a director. When his strength fails, he often finds himself with only blind ambition as fuel; or passion, if he's lucky (it's less corrosive to the system). Richard was a big handsome Welshman, built like a rugby player. He probably thought he could wing it, but Hearts Of Fire earned him his worst reviews and cost him his life.*

"A sorry rock snuff movie," Everett called the film, and "the full-on, no-survivors crash of my career." More received wisdom. But, though so widely execrated, it might be time to start cutting *Hearts Of Fire* a little belated slack; giving it the benefit of a few second-hand doubts. If you haven't seen it yet, perhaps you should. A guilty pleasure awaits.

THANKS: JL, BHS, CH, JB, RE, BD

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## On *Tangled Up In Blue*

I don't see the song as a story; rather, it's a series of pictorial tableaux: man lying in bed, man standing by the side of the road; man and women splitting up at the end of the road; man working as a cook; man working on a fishing boat; man drinking in a topless bar; man meets woman...etc etc. Dylan isn't telling a story, he's painting pictures: it's not narration so much as illustration. The use of colour in the title emphasizes this, of course: the remembered scenes don't tangle the artist up in emotion, they tangle him up in colour. Ultimately this is what the artistic process is: life is distilled into art and the people themselves - be they mathematicians or carpenters' wives - dissolve into illusion, the illusion of art.

So the answer to the question [of whether the song is concerned with one woman or multiple women] is that it doesn't matter who the woman is or women are in *Tangled Up In Blue*; they have ceased to exist in the process of the song's creation. The song wouldn't exist if they still did: perhaps that what the song is about.

Incidentally, it occurs to me that Dylan was very much immersed in the English folk song milieu when he was writing *Blood On The Tracks* and *Desire*, to such a degree that he opens *Tangled Up In Blue* with an almost direct steal from the opening of *Early One Morning* and, indeed, continues his involvement with the song on *One More Cup Of Coffee*...

Early one morning  
Just as the sun was rising  
I heard a young maiden  
In the valley below

It is obvious with songs containing such folk song appropriations that specifics of meaning are to be taken with a pinch of salt.

ER poster littlemaggie on 30 April and 3 May 2016

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