

# Identity and Mystery: A Narrative of Bob Dylan

written by Sarah Paolantonio | November 29, 2017



Photo Credit: Don Rich

Many people hate Bob Dylan because they hate being fooled.

–Ellen Willis

1.

For many years I refused to read about Bob Dylan. I had decided there were too many books about him. How would I ever choose the right one? It was Elijah Wald's *Dylan Goes Electric* that came first. I figured because it's about my favorite version of Dylan—when he plugged in and became a foil to American music—that I would at least know the songs. It turns out *Dylan Goes Electric* is more about the Guthries, the Seegers, and the Newport Folk Festival than it is about Bob Dylan himself. But what I took away from it was Bob Dylan was always exactly who he wanted to be: true to himself, and that I must be true to myself.

Never pretend to be something you aren't. You don't have to please a crowd. Just because you can say something doesn't mean you have to. Question authority even if it's coming from within.

Eight months later after dinner out, I found myself in my natural state: perusing the music section in a bookstore. And two spines, in orange and blue, walked off the shelf toward me. It was Ian Bell's *Once Upon A Time: The Lives of Bob Dylan*, a two-part biography. The particular shade of blue is my favorite color but the orange volume came first. When I picked it up, the author bio was small, and listed one other biography—of Robert Louis Stevenson.

The first line poked me: "Someone had just used the name Judas." Bell was referring to the "Judas!" concert from England in 1966. That concert is my favorite bootleg and live recording of Dylan performing my favorite collection of his songs, the majority from his famous trio of albums released between 1965 and 1966: *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited*, and *Blonde On Blonde*. The first set is acoustic, the second electric.

As I continued reading, Bell's prose swallowed me. He wrote about the way the cry of Judas sounded like "a remonstrance, a denunciation from the congregation." "Where else but in provincial England," Bell wrote, "as the century passes its middle age, could someone libel a Jew as Judas?" By the end of that first page I knew I would buy this book, read it, and buy and read the second volume.

But I had no idea I would gulp it down, quenching some kind of rare thirst in me for details and information.

For me, Bob Dylan has always been an artist to discover. Every side of him, from what's presented across rock history, can even have its own interpretation. Understanding Bob Dylan is a hobby for many and a new one of mine. Of course when I first heard "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35" at age 13, I hated it. I knew nothing of getting stoned and the sounds were too harsh for me to wrap my interests around. It wasn't until I was 17 that I reconsidered when I heard "Hurricane." And when I went away to college and saw Dylan plastered on dorm room walls, saw him in the cute guy in dark sunglasses with fuzzy, curly hair, saw him in the best friend who idolized him and broke my heart—that's when I started to see how diverse Dylan is.

My favorite version of him is Cate Blanchett in Todd Haynes' movie "about" Bob Dylan, *I'm Not There*. Her performance is proof he exists in our imagination because a woman played him better than any man. Her scenes, in black and white, show her as "Jude" while touring the UK—the infamous tour with the infamous shout—with long fingers, tussled hair, and an acid tongue.

This particular phase of Dylan of the mid-1960s is when he was strung out, unafraid, and using plenty of snare and backing piano. If he were to be defined and *awarded* for something, it would be for this era, when he wrote "he not busy being born/is busy dying"—an existential rallying cry to end them all.

I read the majority of Bell's first volume while I was in Cabo San Lucas. Bell's thick biography—the first book is 563 pages and ends in 1975—was perfect for the traveling and sitting in the sun. When we were on the tip of the Baja peninsula of Mexico that October, news stretched to us that Bob Dylan was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. And for a brief second I felt worldly, existing in a foreign country, reading about a man in a book I chose randomly because of its color and a name inside of it. A man who has done nothing but lie and deceive, disappoint and disrupt, a rock-and-roller, a godfather of the counter-culture, who is now in the books deemed just as exceptional as literary giants like Gabriel García Márquez or Seamus Heaney.

I tried not to let the sunscreen and ocean tatter the pages. I kept my

Greenlight Books bookmark nearby to make clean underlines, and played *Bringing It All Back Home* on loop.

The bend of his wire strings, the jingle of the tambourine, and the indifference in his drawl—I read to that album for days. The record soaked through me.

A thousand pages later, through the winters of Minnesota, the even colder one of 1961 when Dylan arrived in New York City, past the heroin, the Jesus years, his rekindling with Judaism, his paintings, and the commemorative harmonicas he sells online, I feel close to Dylan as if he is an absent relative whose life is passed on in small stories and songs. Even still, I am trying to process Dylan as a figure. Whenever I read another book about him and hear another layer of music and lyrics in a familiar song, it consumes me.

“He doesn’t exist,” Bell wrote on the last page, “the truth sets him apart. In some strange, beguiling sense, there is no Bob Dylan.”

Bell taught me that even though there are many renditions of Dylan—and so many records and styles of his to love—he was a chameleon who played with time in every interview, blurring the lines of reality and the story he planned to tell.

I had no idea six months later I’d be in the same room as Dylan, cataloging his every move.

2.

The week after I finished Bell’s biography Patti Smith performed in his place at the Nobel Prize ceremony in Stockholm. Smith sang his 1963 anti-war ballad “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall.” She stumbled and began a verse again, an act of humility and human error Dylan has never been capable of.

The conversations I had about him with fellow writers and poets all interested me, no matter what their stance on his win was. Did he deserve it? Why not? What’s your favorite Dylan record? One told me that on paper, his songs as poetry are messy and impossible. “But once he performs them and you can hear his inflections and tones, *that* is where the poetry is,” she said.

But it was my partner who said it best: “Bob Dylan likely inspired more young people to have an interest in poetry and literature, and to write it, than the majority of working and respected poets combined.”

For my 29<sup>th</sup> birthday, I went to see Bob Dylan live and had no idea what to expect. People warned me that it would be terrible. Others said he was a terrific rock-and-roll show. Dylan does not play the hits and he definitely doesn’t play original arrangements. His catalog spans six decades and is familiar the same time it is odd. And at age 76, the version of Dylan we have

now has a voice that's been to hell and back. He is nearly playing a character of himself at this point. I wondered if I'd understand him at all.

I've learned there's a trick to loving Bob Dylan. You must overcome the fact that you will never really know who he is. The cottage industry of books about him only helps strengthen the mystery Dylan himself has long projected. But there are things Bell wrote of that I am still unable to shake from my memory, as if I read them yesterday. During the Rolling Thunder Revue Tour in 1975, Dylan wore a plastic mask he would remove to reveal himself in whiteface, to be "Bob Dylan." The stories of how he treated his ex-wife Sara tore me in two. Learning that "Visions of Joanna" is about his then-heroin addiction undid everything I thought I knew about love songs and women named Joanna. And I always thought there was a motorcycle accident.

I think the Dylan of the early 1960s—that quintessential version—could come back to the microphone and inspire at least one person, especially during this weird world we live in. But because I want to know what he has to say is why he's reluctant to say anything at all. On one side our culture has changed so dramatically. If he did speak up, people might just see him as another old white man who is past his time. On the other, I believe that radical voice is still in Dylan. He has always been changing. Does that mean he could change back? With Bob, it's not over till he's dead.

3.

Big, bold, ALL CAPS signs were posted at the entrance and in the lobby: TURN OFF YOUR CELL PHONES. NO PHOTOS OR VIDEO OR YOU WILL BE EJECTED FROM THE THEATER. It only reminded me of the decade he comes from and still exists in. Of course you're not allowed to take his photo. Bob Dylan has always controlled the narrative.

Before I found my seat in the darkness, I rushed to the rim of the balcony to look at him.

Seeing him on stage felt like watching history. Even *now* no one knows what he's going to do. People watch him because Dylan could do *anything* at *any second*. At times it felt like watching someone's drunk uncle do an impression of Bob Dylan—only it was actually him.

My line of vision was never interrupted. I was thinking about all the shows he's played, the decades he's endured, and all the versions of him I think I understand. Of course, "Judas!" was on my mind—how could it not be? I would glimpse at the people standing in the general admission section below and wonder if they had seen him live before and when.

As I was watching him gargle lyrics into the microphone, I decided that people go to see Bob Dylan live despite his reputation as a so-so show to solve his mystery, as if he'd break character, or talk to the audience. The thing is, after every song the lights went down to assure us the floor wasn't

open for discussion. He didn't greet the crowd or introduce his band. But he did dance with his microphone stand and hold it like a crooner, bending his legs like Elvis and dancing between the instrumentalists on stage. Dressed in black, with a white dress shirt, a bolo tie, and a white stripe down his pants, if you squinted just enough, he looked like he hadn't aged.

He was the same exact person he was when he was 23 and touring England in 1966—hair just as feathery, profile just as thin, eyes revealing nothing.

Perhaps he'll play that song he never plays or he'll become a different version of himself, I thought. But I knew he's never going to be the person I want him to be. It's the same reason he won't play the hits like they sound on the record: Bob Dylan is no one's monkey. He stopped protesting in 1965 and claims to this day he's never written a protest song.

I was thinking of all the people he's played music with, the famous friends and musicians he's seen lose their lives, and the reach of people he has inspired over a long fruitful career.

Dylan's catalog is ginormous. Aside from his trio of Christian records, his latest—a triple album of classic American songs such as "As Time Goes By"—and his record of Christmas covers, it is my favorite period of polka-dotted shirts, striped pants, and pills that continues to fascinate me and it's a version that defines him. When people set out to discover Bob Dylan, they head towards *Blonde on Blonde* not *Empire Burlesque*. His songs spread farther than we realize. Pioneers of folk rock The Byrds covered "Mr. Tambourine Man" and even named their debut album after it, the same year Dylan released it in 1965. In fact, it was covered thirteen times in its first year of existence, and has since been covered by everyone from Odetta to William Shatner. Dylan's classic era is not just a major ingredient in the canon of popular music. He helped inspire it.

In the end, Dylan is The Cool Guy. Dylan is the guy who gave The Beatles weed for the first time. *He's* the guy who went electric. To poets, songwriters, hippies and punks alike he is an entry point and an idea.

Bell's book has extensive quotes from Dylan himself, on his albums, his paintings, and his life. "The songs just fall together," Dylan said in an interview with *Rolling Stone* in 2012, "[Dylan's 2012 album *Tempest* is] where anything goes and you just gotta believe it will make sense." Bell writes: "Dylan is describing both his method and the moral universe of the songs. One subtext of *Tempest...* is that anyone expecting explanations from the deity is wasting time and effort."

The list of artists who treat life as performance art is short. Bob Dylan is likely the most well known life-as-art artist. The first and only woman Dylanologist I've been able to find, Ellen Willis, introduced me to this concept. She passed in 2006.

Willis was the first pop music critic for the *New Yorker*. The essay she wrote in *Cheetah* magazine in 1967 about Dylan got her the job: "For Dylan has exploited his image as a vehicle for artistic statement. The same is true of

Andy Warhol and, to a lesser degree, of the Beatles and Allen Ginsberg. (In contrast, James Dean and Marilyn Monroe were creatures, not masters, of their image.)" She calls Dylan a "poet of alienation." "Not since Rimbaud said "I is another" has an artist been so obsessed with escaping identity," she wrote.

Over the two hour set, I recognized four songs. He played "Desolation Row" and it was such a fast pace, the near twelve-minute song couldn't have lasted more than five. I was happy to hear "Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again," he played "Don't Think Twice It's Alright" early on, and his second encore was "Ballad of a Thin Man." I kept a list in my journal writing in the darkness, afraid that pulling out my phone for light would get me tossed, as I had seen theater workers warning other audience members.

For most of the show, when he wasn't bending and dipping with the microphone, he commanded the theater as he stood behind a baby grand piano. Dylan banging out "Ballad of a Thin Man" 52 years after he originally wrote and recorded it made it sound even more historical. After all it was after "Ballad of a Thin Man" that someone shouted "Judas!" at Dylan in 1966. (He, of course, turned to his band and said, "Play fucking loud.")

He wasn't asking us if we don't know what's going on. He was telling us, Mr. Jones, that we have no idea what's happening here. It could've been a slight political act, to perform that song during this political time, during this presidency, or it could've been a coincidence. (According to his website where every performance is sorted, Dylan has played "Ballad of a Thin Man" 1,154 times since he first played it in 1965.)

I was happy to sing along to "Don't Think Twice It's Alright" live because it has one of my favorite Dylan lyrics in it. That song tells us everything we need to know about Bob Dylan: that he will never belong to anyone. He certainly doesn't belong to women. He treats us, historically, like shit. It doesn't mean we won't or don't love him. Sometimes his misogyny makes it harder to love him, yes. That is true for many male artists. But I find myself forgiving him over and over. The lyric I love is an early declaration, originally recorded in 1963, of "no:" *I gave her my heart/but she wanted my soul/don't think twice it's alright.*

How hard it must be to love someone and not share your soul with them. To me that lyric gives it all away. Bob Dylan is for no one else. He is just his.

Ian Bell died a few years after the second volume was published, in 2015, of unknown causes at the age of 59. For all the pages he spent discussing Dylan's relationship with the Nobel Prize—should they or shouldn't they—he never got to see him win it. The biography originally began as research on Dylan, to prove that he deserved it. (Dylan had been nominated every year since 1993.) Bell died with Bob Dylan's mystery and undeserved legacy intact, never knowing Dylan was finally given what Bell knew he deserved all along.

To fall in love with a mystery like Bob Dylan is mischievous. Although unlike Bell and Dylan, I have youth on my side. I'll live to see what Dylan becomes even after his time is up.



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If writing defies “common sense,” if it seems to go against traditional modes of thought, norms, and histories, the idea of that common sense no longer makes sense, or might make sense if we’re allowed to reinvent ourselves. That’s what I’m looking at with the literacy narrative, the coming-into-language story. I want to hear yours: when you first “clicked” with a language, whatever it is; why you questioned the modes of your Englishes; how you wrote “poetry,” but looked at it again and called it “lyric essay.” I want to see your literacy narrative in its scholarly, creative, and hybrid forms. Send your literacy narratives to Sylvia Chan at [sylvia@entropymag.org](mailto:sylvia@entropymag.org). Stay tuned for more literacy narratives from [yours truly and others](#).