
BOB DYLAN

“BLOWIN’ IN THE WIND” (1962)

Notes by Father (ret.) Rick Ganz

BACKGROUND

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From the Apple Music Notes – “Bob Dylan’s first album was mostly old folk and blues songs, but his second album, *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* (1962), shows a nearly unbelievable transformation. Dylan’s songwriting talents came fast and furious. These earliest compositions include the landmark civil rights anthem “Blowin’ in the Wind”; the anti-war screeds “Masters of War,” “Talkin’ World War III Blues,” and “A Hard Rain’s a-Gonna Fall”; and the romantic turns of “Girl from the North Country” and “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right.” Modern singer-songwriting starts here.”

Wikipedia at “Blowin’ in the Wind” – “Blowin' in the Wind" was first covered by the Chad Mitchell Trio, but their record company delayed release of the album containing it because the song included the word death, so the trio lost out to Peter, Paul and Mary, who were represented by Dylan's manager, Albert Grossman. The single sold a phenomenal 300,000 copies in the first week of release and made the song world-famous. On August 17, 1963, it reached number two on the Billboard pop chart, with sales exceeding one million copies. Peter Yarrow recalled that, when he told Dylan he would make more than \$5,000 (equivalent to \$42,000 in 2020[12]) from the publishing rights, Dylan was speechless.[13] Peter, Paul and Mary's version of the song also spent five weeks atop the easy listening chart.

Wikipedia at “Blowin’ in the Wind” – “In June 1962, the song was published in *Sing Out!*, accompanied by Dylan's comments: “There ain't too much I can say about this song except that the answer is blowing in the wind. It ain't in no book or movie or TV show or discussion group. Man, it's in the wind — and it's blowing in the wind. Too many of these hip people are telling me where the answer is, but, oh, I won't believe that. I still say it's in the wind and just like a restless piece of paper it's got to come down some ... But the only trouble is that no one picks up the answer when it comes down so not too many people get to see and know ... and

then it flies away. *I still say that some of the biggest criminals are those that turn their heads away when they see wrong and know it's wrong.* I'm only 21 years old and I know that there's been too many wars ... You people over 21, you're older and smarter.” And further, “In 1994, the song was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame. In 2004, it was ranked number 14 on *Rolling Stone* magazine's list of the 500 Greatest Songs of All Time.” And further, “The song was published for the first time in May 1962, in the sixth issue of *Broadside*, the magazine founded by Pete Seeger and devoted to topical songs. The theme may have been taken from a passage in **Woody Guthrie's autobiography, *Bound for Glory*,¹ in which Guthrie compared his political sensibility to newspapers blowing in the winds of New York City streets and alleys.** Dylan was certainly familiar with Guthrie's work; his reading of it had been a major turning point in his intellectual and political development.”

Nat Hentoff, “The Crackin’, Shakin’, Breakin’ Sounds” in *The New Yorker* (16 October 1964) –

The second—and more influential—demiurge of the folk-music microcosm is **Bob Dylan, who is also twenty-three.** Dylan's impact has been the greater because he is a writer of songs as well as a performer. Such compositions of his as “Blowin’ in the Wind,” “Masters of War,” “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right,” and “Only a Pawn in Their Game” have become part of the repertoire of many other performers, **including Miss Baez, who has explained, “Bobby is expressing what I—and many other young people—feel, what we want to say. Most of the ‘protest’ songs about the bomb and race prejudice and conformity are stupid. They have no beauty. But Bobby’s songs are powerful as poetry and powerful as music. And, oh, my God, how that boy can sing!”** Another reason for Dylan's impact is the singular force of his personality. Wiry, tense, and boyish, **Dylan looks and acts like a fusion of Huck Finn and a young Woody Guthrie. Both onstage and off, he appears to be just barely able to contain his prodigious energy.** Pete Seeger, who, at forty-five, is one of the elders of American folk music, recently observed, “Dylan may well become the country's most creative troubadour—if he doesn't explode.”

Dylan's early songs in New York, such as the anthemic “Blowin’ in the Wind,” sounded like the songs that the folkies were used to, such as Guthrie's “This Land Is Your Land,” but with richer imagery. [Curtis, Jim. *Decoding Dylan* (p. 66). McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers. Kindle Edition.]

¹ *Wikipedia* – “*Bound for Glory* [published 1943] is the partially fictionalized autobiography of folk singer and songwriter Woody Guthrie. The book describes Guthrie's childhood, his travels across the United States as a hobo on the railroad, and towards the end his beginning to get recognition as a singer. Some of the experiences of fruit picking and a hobo camp are similar to those described in *The Grapes of Wrath* [published by John Steinbeck in 1939].”

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 1 (NABRE) – ¹In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth^a—²and the earth was without form or shape, with darkness over the abyss and a mighty wind sweeping over the waters—^b ²

Ezekiel 12 - ¹The word of the LORD came to me: ²Son of man, you live in the midst of a rebellious house; they have eyes to see, but do not see, and ears to hear but do not hear. **They are such a rebellious house!**^a ³Now, son of man, during the day while they watch, pack a bag for exile,* and again while they watch, **go into exile from your place to another place**; perhaps they will see that they are a rebellious house. ⁴During the day, while they watch, bring out your bag, an exile's bag. In the evening, again while they watch, go out as if into exile.^b ⁵While they watch, dig a hole through the wall* and go out through it. ⁶While they watch, shoulder your load and go out in darkness. Cover your face so you cannot see the land, for I am making you a sign for the house of Israel!^c ³

John 3 (NABRE) – ⁵Jesus answered, “Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.”^d ⁶What is born of flesh is flesh and what is born

^a Gn 2:1, 4; 2 Mc 7:28; Ps 8:4; 33:6; 89:12; 90:2; Wis 11:17; Sir 16:24; Jer 10:12; Acts 14:15; Col 1:16–17; Heb 1:2–3; 3:4; 11:3; Rev 4:11.

^b Jer 4:23.

² *New American Bible*, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Ge 1:1–2.

^a Is 6:9–10; Jer 5:21; cf. Mt 13:15; Mk 4:12; 8:18.

* An exile's bag contains bare necessities, probably no more than a bowl, a mat, and a waterskin. The prophet's action foreshadows the fate of ruler and people (vv. 11–14).

^b 2 Kgs 25:4.

* *Through the wall*: mud-brick outer wall of a private home. In this symbolic action, Ezekiel represents the enemy forces, and the house wall, the city wall of Jerusalem breached by the Babylonian army.

^c Is 8:18.

³ *New American Bible*, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Eze 12:1–6.

^d 1:32; 7:39; 19:30, 34–35; Is 32:15; 44:3; Ez 36:25–27; Jl 3:1–2.

of spirit is spirit.^e ⁷ Do not be amazed that I told you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸ The wind* blows where it wills, and you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”^f ⁹ Nicodemus answered and said to him, “How can this happen?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered and said to him, “You are the teacher of Israel and you do not understand this?”⁴

THE TEXT

How many roads must⁵ a man walk down⁶
Before you call him a man?
Yes⁷, ’n’ how many seas must a white dove sail

^e 6:63; 1 Cor 15:44–50.

* *Wind*: the Greek word *pneuma* (as well as the Hebrew *rûah*) means both “wind” and “spirit.” In the play on the double meaning, “wind” is primary.

^f Eccl 11:4–5; Acts 2:2–4.

⁴ [New American Bible](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Jn 3:5–10.

⁵ “**How many times must**” – This is something heard often in families: “How many times must I tell **you** to lock the door?!” , etc. It typically expresses exasperation, anger, frustration. Dylan drops the accusatory “you” that we would expect and, instead, generalizes into “parabolic” speech. By doing this, Dylan subverts his hearers’ ability to get offended – “Who the hell are *you* to speak to *me* in that way?!”, etc. Instead, his hearers focus on “How many times?”

⁶ “**How many roads**” – There is of course no correct answer to this question. Nor is it clear how “walking down a road” will, eventually, cause someone to exclaim, “Now that’s a man right there.” I think Dylan means that “plodding along” a road, or roads, is an image of living a person living a “conventional” life – always staying on roads already laid out by those who came before him. Yet, if a person “walks” all of the “right” roads, hoping that he might finally be considered an “adult” and worthy of respect, then he will live a mostly wasted life because so conventional, never learning his particular gift and learning how to be responsible for it.

⁷ “**Yes**” – I do not think that this is an answer to a question having been asked. I think here it means “And further...”. But by using “Yes” here, Dylan intensifies *the dialogical nature* of his lyric. Further, notice Dylan’s alliteration of “s” sounds in these two lines. ***It almost sounds like the wind*** blowing over the waters (of chaos) and under the wings of the dove (the primordial, creative Spirit of God? – **Genesis 1** - ¹ In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth—² and the earth was without form or shape, with darkness over the abyss and a **mighty wind sweeping over the waters**— [New American Bible, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Ge 1:1–2.]

Before she sleeps in the sand?⁸
Yes, 'n' how many times must the cannonballs fly
Before they're forever banned?⁹
The answer,¹⁰ my friend,¹¹ is blowin'¹² in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind¹³

⁸ “**a white dove**” – Again, we see Dylan’s piling up of images, not so that we might carefully understand each one (as I seek to do here, when doing a close reading of his texts!), but so that we might catch an insight in the midst of all of the clashing images. However, what this particular image evokes for me is from the end of **the “Flood Narrative” in Genesis 8** - ⁸Then he released a dove, to see if the waters had lessened on the earth. ⁹ But the dove could find no place to perch, and it returned to him in the ark, for there was water over all the earth. Putting out his hand, he caught the dove and drew it back to him inside the ark. ¹⁰ He waited yet seven days more and again released the dove from the ark. ¹¹ In the evening the dove came back to him, and there in its bill was a plucked-off olive leaf! So Noah knew that the waters had diminished on the earth. ¹² He waited yet another seven days and then released the dove; but this time it did not come back. [*New American Bible, Revised Edition*. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Ge 8:8–12.]

⁹ “**banned**” – This verb has a distinctly political sound, a “protest” song sound. Yet, by rhyming “banned” with “sand”, we are left with the impression of “cannonballs” or more accurately, the cannons, going silent, finally, as if they have gone to sleep. This creates in the imagination a beautiful, compelling image, sort of in the mode of “turning swords into ploughshares” – see **Isaiah 2 (NABRE)** –

⁴He shall judge between the nations,
and set terms for many peoples.
They shall beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks;
One nation shall not raise the sword against another,
nor shall they train for war again.⁹

¹⁰ “**the answer**” – Dylan has not been interested in answers, because the Questions he asks are not answerable – “How many roads ... how many seas ... how many times”. By asking unanswerable Questions, Dylan creates **riddles**, and riddles tease the mind, activates a conventional, self-satisfied, or somnolent mind.

¹¹ “**my friend**” – We know that Dylan was not a very good friend; just too awkward, often impolite, edgy, and always intensely private. So, we do not imagine that Dylan considered his listeners his “friends.” But by using this description of his relation to his hearers, he indicates that his “edgy” lyrics are not intending to alienate his hearers, but instead seeking to connect with them, to establish a relationship between him and them for the sake of these kinds of Questions.

¹² “**blowin**” – Of course it could have been easy, and it would not change the meaning, for Dylan to have used “blowing”. But, Dylan regularly used colloquial or slang English, and it was always deliberate. He sought through that “colloquial” *sound* to create an impression in the hearer.

¹³ “**blowin' in the wind**” – As to this image, Dylan had this to say, quoted in the *Wikipedia* article (quoted in my Notes above) concerning this song (a comment made in June 1962): “There ain't too much I can say about this song except that the answer is blowing in the wind. It ain't in no book or movie or TV show or discussion group. Man, it's in the wind — and it's blowing in the wind. Too many of these hip people are telling me where the answer is, but, oh, I won't believe that. I still say it's in the wind and just like a restless piece of paper it's got to

How many years can a mountain exist
Before it's washed to the sea?¹⁴
Yes, 'n' how many years can some people exist
Before they're allowed to be free?¹⁵
Yes, 'n' how many times can a man turn his head
Pretending he just doesn't see?¹⁶
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind¹⁷

come down some ... But the only trouble is that no one picks up the answer when it comes down, so not too many people get to see and know ... and then it flies away.”

¹⁴ **“How many years can a mountain exist?”** – These next three Questions are more answerable. Or one could imagine that one could learn how to answer them. The mechanism by which mountains get “washed” into the sea indicates that it is **rain** that will do it. Other natural elements can wear down a mountain, but only water can “wash” the rubble into the sea. And scholars of Dylan note how significant a roll that “rain” plays for Dylan, an important symbol for him. See **Curtis** – “When Dylan images nuclear fallout as **rain**, he makes it more familiar, and therefore more frightening. The Bomb was an especially frightening symbol of technological change—one that haunted people in the age of fallout shelters. **This is why Dylan compares the effects of social change to the effects of hard rain in “The Times They Are a-Changin’.**” [Curtis, Jim. *Decoding Dylan* (p. 31). McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers. Kindle Edition.] And further, Curtis – “**Rain** in Dylan’s songs can thus have an aggressive quality. This is the case in the metaphorical use of rain in his ominous “Ballad of Hollis Brown.” The rain motif in Dylan’s songs culminates in the mesmerizing first line of “Just Like Tom Thumb’s Blues,” which refers to getting lost in the rain. That is to say, when you are lost in the rain in a foreign country where resurrection is denied to you, that is about as bad as it gets. **Hemingway once said that he liked to describe “what the weather was like,” and Dylan’s imagery of the rain is related to his imagery of rain as a symbol for social change, as in “Blowin’ in the Wind.” Like the rain, the wind often brings adversity and hard times,** as in “Girl from the North Country.” [Curtis, Jim. *Decoding Dylan* (p. 31). McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers. Kindle Edition.]

¹⁵ **“How many years can some people exist”** – I wonder if Dylan might have meant, “can some people *merely* exist”. It seems that human beings have a habit of counting “how long” when they speak of their hard times, not how long have their good times lasted. The ticking of the clock, the passing of Time, intrudes into one’s awareness more when one is suffering than when one is happy and joyous. Thus, people speak of how many months or years of their exile from anything approaching normal. Thus, people in jail ask, “How long are you in here for?” Or, in this age of Black Lives Matter (a really bad title given, and then adopted, for this social “movement”), we heard the eloquent Blacks regular speaking of “how long” must we continue to suffer bias by the Police forces, must we continue to demand that “all humans are created equal”, etc.

¹⁶ **“pretending that he just doesn’t see”** – There is humor here when Dylan has us see someone “turning his head”, as if on a swivel, over and over again, just to avoid seeing what is right there. Remember Dylan’s comment in June 1962 when asked about this song: “I still say that some of the biggest criminals are those that turn their heads away when they see wrong and know it's wrong.” It is a devastating thing for an aware person, such as Dylan, to perceive that people much older than he, who should most certainly know better, deliberately ignore wrong that they clearly see, but who **pretend** that they do not see.

¹⁷ **“The answer, my friend”** – It is important to pay particular attention to Dylan’s *intonation* of these lines that are repeated at the end of each stanza, but whose meaning changes with the intonation. Thus, in a way,

How many times must a man look up
Before he can see the sky?¹⁸
Yes, 'n' how many ears must one man have
Before he can hear people cry?
Yes, 'n' how many deaths will it take till he knows
That too many people have died?¹⁹
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind

Dylan does not *repeat* these lines; they are different each time. I hear this time around Dylan with a wistful tone, but also with a gentle, satiric bite.

¹⁸ “**How many times ... how many ears ... how many deaths**” – In this stanza, the answer to the Questions is, or should be, the same: “ONCE!” and “TWO!” and “ONE!” In other words, the “generalizing” style of the first stanza changes to *possibly* “answerable” Questions in stanza two, to *certainly* answerable Questions in stanza three.

¹⁹ “**How many deaths**” – I remember reading studies concerning our capacity as human beings to comprehend more than a few deaths. Very quickly, deaths just become meaningless numbers. And in mass killings that have become so much more common in our self-torturing American moment, we react to the Killer far more than we react to those Killed, because we can comprehend one person more than “a bunch”.