
BOB DYLAN

“LIKE A ROLLING STONE” (1964)

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From Apple Music Notes: “This album – *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965) - is electric in every sense, a nervy jangle that finds a taunting Bob Dylan fronting a full-fledged rock band and shedding his folkie past. The title tune, “From a Buick 6,” and “Tombstone Blues” have more to do with garage-y American proto-punk than *Help!* or *Rubber Soul*, The Beatles’ releases that frame this album’s era. There may be nods to the blues (“It Takes a Lot to Laugh”) and his recent folk history (“Desolation Row”), **but Dylan’s language intoxicates; it’s poetic, brilliantly snotty, and sometimes inscrutable.**”

Wikipedia – “Critics have described the track as revolutionary in its combination of different musical elements, the youthful, cynical sound of Dylan's voice, and the directness of the question ‘How does it feel?’ ‘Like a Rolling Stone’ completed the transformation of Dylan's image from folk singer to rock star, **and it is considered one of the most influential compositions in postwar popular music.** According to review aggregator Acclaimed Music, ‘Like a Rolling Stone’ is the statistically most acclaimed song of all time. *Rolling Stone* magazine listed the song at No. 1 in their ‘500 Greatest Songs of All Time’ list. The song has been covered by many artists, from the *Jimi Hendrix Experience* and the *Rolling Stones* to the *Wailers* and *Green Day*.”

QUOTES

Or, in the words of British writer Wyndham Lewis, whom McLuhan liked to quote, “**The artist is continually engaged in writing a history of the future because he is the only one who understands the nature of the present.**”⁴¹ [Curtis, Jim. *Decoding Dylan* (p. 42). McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers. Kindle Edition.]

From the website, **Classic Rock History**,¹ concerning the ten greatest Dylan songs of the 1960s

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3 – “Like A Rolling Stone”, the opening track on *Highway 61 Revisited* – 1965

Yes, here it is, the track from Dylan’s 60s catalog that’s most instantly recognizable. ‘Like A Rolling Stone’ is **the** rock and roll track. ‘Bringing it Back Home,’ released earlier in the year, toyed with **the idea of combining Dylan’s signature poetry with rock and roll. This opening track of the subsequent album, though, is the most intense manifestation of that idea.**

The spider-web effect of inspiration that ‘Like A Rolling Stone’ created across the world is entirely incalculable. Fortunately, we can always leave it to Bruce Springsteen to attempt to calculate it:

... on came that snare shot that sounded like somebody had kicked open the door to your mind... The way that Elvis freed your body, Dylan freed your mind. [Bruce Springsteen at the *inducting of Dylan into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame / 1988*

The turning point of music in the 1960s was when John Lennon wanted to be like Bob Dylan and Bob Dylan wanted to be like John Lennon. ‘Like A Rolling Stone’ was Dylan’s first attempt to do that, opening himself up the intense world of rock and roll.

In his memoir *Chronicles: Volume One*, Dylan described the kinship he felt with the route that supplied the title of his sixth album: "**Highway 61, the main thoroughfare of the country blues, begins about where I began. I always felt like I'd started on it, always had been on it and could go anywhere, even down into the deep Delta country. It was the same road, full of the same contradictions, the same one-horse towns, the same spiritual ancestors ... It was my place in the universe, always felt like it was in my blood.**"

Wikipedia, in regard to the title of Dylan’s album *Highway 61 Revisited* (released 1965) - When he was growing up in the 1950s, Highway 61 stretched from the Canada–US border in far northeast Minnesota (redesignated in 1991 as MN-61), through Duluth, near where Dylan was born in Hibbing, along the Mississippi River down to New Orleans. **Along the way, the route passed near the birthplaces and homes of influential musicians such as Muddy Waters, Son House, Elvis Presley and Charley Patton. The "empress of the blues", Bessie Smith, died after sustaining serious injuries in an automobile accident on Highway 61.** Critic Mark Polizzotti points out that blues legend Robert Johnson is alleged to have sold his soul to the devil at the highway's crossroads with Route 49. The highway had also been the subject of

¹ See: <https://www.classicrockhistory.com/best-bob-dylan-songs-1960s/>.

several blues recordings, notably Roosevelt Sykes' "Highway 61 Blues" (1932) and Mississippi Fred McDowell's "61 Highway" (1964).

THE NEWPORT FOLK FESTIVAL (25 JULY 1965)

From History.com² - Dylan's first appearance at the 1965 festival came on Saturday, July 24, when he performed with his usual acoustic guitar and harmonica at a Newport songwriter's workshop. **Both the crowd and the festival's organizers assumed he would play a similar show at the event's star-studded Sunday night concert, but Dylan—seemingly on a whim—had decided it was time for something new.** After leaving the stage on Saturday, he assembled keyboardist Al Kooper and members of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band and stayed up until dawn rehearsing for an electric rock 'n' roll show.... This wasn't the Dylan the folk purists in audience had paid to see. **To them, it was a musical betrayal—proof that he had abandoned the authenticity of folk for the glitz and glamor of rock 'n' roll.** As the set continued, portions of the crowd erupted with jeers and scattered cries of "sellout!" and "get rid of that band!"... Dylan's next rock album, *Highway 61 Revisited*, was hailed as an instant classic, and "Like a Rolling Stone" became his first hit single. By the time his album *Blonde on Blonde* was released in 1966, many former critics were forced to admit that electric instruments had not dampened his flair for writing rebellious songs or poetic, quotable lyrics.... **The Newport Folk Festival wouldn't be the last time that Bob Dylan reinvented himself, but it is now remembered as a pivotal juncture in his career. It was the moment when he proclaimed his artistic independence and helped usher in a new era of lyrics-driven rock 'n' roll.**

The twilight of the gods—or at least of the folk god Bob Dylan—came on the evening of Sunday, July 25, 1965, when he played with The Hawks, the group with whom he had just recorded "Like a Rolling Stone."⁵⁰ In the tapes of that landmark event, one can hear the boos while they are still tuning up their electric instruments. When you watch the version that Scorsese shows in the documentary *No Direction Home*, you realize that you are watching cultural change close-up and personal; it is messy, chaotic, and unpleasant. [Curtis, Jim. *Decoding Dylan* (p. 44). McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers. Kindle Edition.]

The Announcement for the Newport Folk Festival of July 1965³ - "Here is the complete lineup for the 7th annual Newport Folk Festival which took place from Thursday, July 22nd 1965 until Sunday, July 25th 1965 in Newport, Rhode Island. The lineup features Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Maybelle Carter, Son House, Mississippi John Hurt, Peter, Paul & Mary, Pete

² See: <https://www.history.com/news/the-day-dylan-went-electric>.

³ See: <https://gaslightrecords.com/news/newport-folk-festival-1965-lineup-announced>.

Seeger, Eric Von Schmidt, Odetta, Lightnin' Hopkins, The Paul Butterfield Blues Band, Hamilton Camp & Gordon Lightfoot.”

And at History.com⁴ – Six weeks earlier, Bob Dylan had recorded the single that marked his move out of acoustic folk and into the idiom of electrified rock and roll. **“Like A Rolling Stone” had only been released five days before his appearance at Newport, however, so most in the audience had no idea what lay in store for them.** Neither did festival organizers, who were as surprised to see Dylan’s crew setting up heavy sound equipment during sound check as that evening’s audience would be to hear what came out of it. With Al Kooper on organ and The Paul Butterfield Blues Band backing him, Dylan took to the stage with his Fender Stratocaster on the evening of July 25 and launched into an electrified version of “Maggie’s Farm.” Almost immediately, the jeering and yelling from the audience grew loud enough nearly to drown out the sound of Dylan and his band. It has been stated by some who witnessed the historic performance that some of the yelling from the audience that night was about the terrible sound quality of the performance—overloud in general and mixed so poorly that Dylan’s vocals were unintelligible. **But what prompted the outright booing—even over Dylan’s next number, the now-classic “Like A Rolling Stone”—was a sense of dismay and betrayal on the part of an audience unprepared for the singer’s new artistic direction.**

Modris Eksteins [here Curtis compares the reception of Stravinsky’s *Rites of Spring* with that of Dylan’s performance of “Like a Rolling Stone”] examines the numerous wildly contradictory accounts of that evening in his book *Rites of Spring* and concludes: “To have been in the audience that evening was to have participated not simply at another exhibition but in the very creation of modern art, in that *the response of the audience was and is as important to the meaning of this art as the intentions of those who produced it.* Art has transcended reason, didacticism, and a moral purpose: *art has become provocation and event*.”⁵² [Curtis, Jim. *Decoding Dylan* (p. 44). McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers. Kindle Edition.]

In “Like a Rolling Stone,” Dylan stridently, aggressively announces his new-found maturity, and defies people to ignore him. This ironic, challenging song has multiple meanings and draws on multiple sources. For the first time, we must bring some knowledge of movies, popular music, and literature to a Dylan song in order to interpret it properly. No wonder it has remained an enigma for so long.” [Curtis, Jim. *Decoding Dylan* (p. 45). McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers. Kindle Edition.]

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**democratize**”, which Curtis describes as “the great American myth”; namely, the myth that everyone is/should be the same ... at least in power and significance - *transitive*. To make (something) accessible to a wide range of people; to make

⁴ See: <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/dylan-goes-electric-at-the-newport-folk-festival>.

(something) less elitist, pretentious, etc. In quot. [1798](#): (*intransitive*) **to treat all people equally.**

THE TEXT

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**rolling stone**” – “A person who is unwilling to settle for long in one place, a rambler, a wanderer. The register of usage is largely neutral, though the term is occasionally used pejoratively.”

INTONATION - The pattern of variation in pitch during a spoken utterance. Intonation has important expressive functions, indicating the speaker’s attitudes (of astonishment, sarcasm, etc.), but it also signals the grammatical status of an utterance, for instance by showing relations between clauses or by marking the difference between a simple statement and a question: in English, a simple assertion like “We are going” can be changed into a question simply by reversing its intonation from a lowering of pitch to a raising of pitch. [Baldick, Chris. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford Quick Reference) (pp. 265-266). OUP Oxford. Kindle Edition.]

IRONY - A subtly humorous perception of inconsistency, in which an apparently straightforward statement or event is undermined by its *context so as to give it a very different significance. In various forms, irony appears in many kinds of literature, from the *tragedy of Sophocles to the novels of Jane Austen and Henry James, **but is especially important in *satire, as in Voltaire and Swift. At its simplest, in verbal irony, it involves a discrepancy between what is said and what is really meant, as in its crude form, sarcasm; for the *figures of speech exploiting this discrepancy, see antiphrasis, litotes, meiosis.** The more sustained structural irony in literature involves the use of a naïve or deluded hero or *unreliable narrator, whose view of the world differs widely from the true circumstances recognized by the author and readers; literary irony thus flatters its readers’ intelligence at the expense of a character (or fictional narrator). A similar sense of detached superiority is achieved by dramatic irony, in which the audience knows more about a character’s situation than the character does, foreseeing an outcome contrary to the character’s expectations, and thus ascribing a sharply different sense to some of the character’s own statements; in *tragedies, this is called tragic irony. The term cosmic irony is sometimes used to denote a view of people as the dupes of a cruelly mocking Fate, as in the novels of Thomas Hardy. A writer whose works are characterized by an ironic tone may be called an ironist. [Baldick, Chris. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford Quick Reference) (pp. 268-269). OUP Oxford. Kindle Edition.]

SATIRE - A mode of writing that exposes the failings of individuals, institutions, or societies to ridicule and scorn. Satire is often an incidental element in literary works that may not be wholly satirical, especially in *comedy. Its tone may vary from tolerant amusement, as in the verse satires of the Roman poet Horace, to bitter indignation, as in the verse of Juvenal and the prose of Jonathan Swift (see juvenalian). Various forms of literature may be satirical, from the plays of Ben Jonson or of Molière and the poetry of Chaucer or Byron to the prose writings of Rabelais and Voltaire. The models of Roman satire, especially the verse satires of Horace and Juvenal, inspired some important imitations by Boileau, Pope, and Johnson in **the greatest period of satire—the 17th and 18th centuries—when writers could appeal to a shared sense of normal conduct from which vice and folly were seen to stray**. In this classical tradition, an important form is ‘formal’ or ‘direct’ satire, in which the writer directly addresses the reader (or recipient of a verse letter) with satiric comment. The alternative form of ‘indirect’ satire usually found in plays and novels allows us to draw our own conclusions from the actions of the characters, as for example in the novels of Evelyn Waugh or Chinua Achebe. See also LAMPOON. [Baldick, Chris. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford Quick Reference) (p. 413). OUP Oxford. Kindle Edition.]

Dylan recorded “Like a Rolling Stone” on June 25, 1965, about a month after his twenty-fourth birthday on May 24, 1965... **In “Like a Rolling Stone” the singer calls on Miss Lonely to leave her false life in a private school and to begin an authentic (i.e., democratic) life symbolized by the street.** [Curtis, Jim. *Decoding Dylan* (p. 66). McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers. Kindle Edition.]

The comparable market segmentation for American popular music in the 1960s occurred as a matter of demographics, not income. **To understand this segmentation, we can consider two groups—people born at the beginning of the baby boom, in 1947–8, and those born in the middle of it, in 1953–54. The first group was 20 in 1966–7; it had experienced the ecstasy of “Beatlemania,” and then matured as the Beatles matured. The second group was 14 in 1968, and this meant that it entered adolescence at a time of profoundly disorienting social change.** Unsure of themselves, as 14-year-olds notoriously are, and even more unsure of the world around them, they wanted music that acknowledged the times, like Sonny and Cher’s “The Beat Goes On” and The Monkees’ “Pleasant Valley Sunday,” but which did not frighten or disorient them. **To borrow a term from Malcolm Gladwell, “Like a Rolling Stone” marked the tipping point between these two groups.** [Curtis, Jim. *Decoding Dylan* (pp. 67-68). McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers. Kindle Edition.]

TEXT

Once upon a time⁵ you⁶ dressed so fine
You threw⁷ the bums⁸ a dime in your prime⁹, didn't you?¹⁰

⁵ **“Once upon a time”** – All of us, when we hear these as the introduction to a story that someone is about to tell us, are disposed to take delight in what now will be told. These words are a linguistic indicator of entrance into “fairyland”, or as Tolkien puts it, “into the perilous realm.” “Once upon a time” suggests an ADVENTURE, about something unexpected that is going to be happening to a character, or characters, in the story. Curtis writes: “To return to “Like a Rolling Stone,” the first line, “Once upon a time,” has great thematic importance, as first lines in Dylan’s songs often do. Anything that begins “Once upon a time” is a fairy tale, which is what “Like a Rolling Stone” is. It is an ironic, multi-leveled version of a fairy tale, to be sure, but a fairy tale nevertheless. **It is not just any fairy tale, either; it is the essential American fairy tale—a story of democratization. This fairy tale is one in which everybody lives happily ever after, because everybody is democratized (i.e., included in the end).**” [Curtis, Jim. *Decoding Dylan* (p. 46). McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers. Kindle Edition.]

⁶ **“you”** – This is aggressive of Dylan. Remember that he is singing this, for the first time, to the devotees of Folk Music, and perhaps to many there who had become rich and famous as a result. Dylan leaves unexplained who the YOU is. And so I think of Jesus’ words: “let those who have ears / hear” comes to mind: see Matthew 11: ¹⁵ Whoever has ears ought to hear. [*New American Bible, Revised Edition*. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Mt 11:15.]

⁷ **“threw”** – This choice of verb is so evocative. Instead of simply “giving” or “offering” to a poor person some money, we are forced to watch someone “dressed so fine” throwing money at a beggar. It is a dismissive and violent and unfriendly image.

⁸ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the noun **“bum”** (the sixth noun of this name) indicates that it is US Slang and that it originally meant (around 1863) “a drinking spree”, or as we also say that a person “went on a toot.” It is easy to see how the noun could then come to be applied (by 1864) to a person who suffers regular drinking sprees, and so has become “a tramp, a vagrant, a habitual loafer, a beggar, a scrounger.” The noun **“bummer”** the OED notes means: “a worthless, lazy, or despicable person.”

⁹ **“in your prime”** – Again, Dylan’s biting sarcasm. The *Oxford English Dictionary* at **“prime”**: “Of a person or group of people: very important or powerful; foremost, leading, greatest.” Unfortunately, it is always the case that people who consider themselves “important, powerful, leading, greatest” know that they are, because they have worked hard to earn their way into this kind of personhood, into this kind of social recognition. But the fact is that “the greatest among you shall be the least” as Jesus enjoins. Or to put this another way, the truly greatest people that I have known *do not believe that they are* “powerful, foremost, leading, greatest.” And such people, actually, get very uncomfortable when people praise them for “greatness, power, or significance.” Why? Because such people know that the way those praising him or her are using those terms is not what he or she means by them.

¹⁰ **“didn’t you?”** – This is accusatory and aggressive. The way Dylan voices this question is powerful. **The sound is as important as the question.** And we are left wondering how it is that Dylan saw him/her acting this way to a bum. Yet we recall that when Dylan first came to New York City, he knew no one and had to start out with little, having to “scrounge” for food and a place to stay. But we begin to feel that Dylan is channeling God who “sees all”. I recall the famous story in **Luke 16 – the Rich Man and Lazarus** – which includes these lines:

People'd call, say, "Beware doll"¹¹, you're bound to fall"¹²
You thought¹³ they were all¹⁴ kiddin' you¹⁵
You used to laugh about¹⁶

²⁵ Abraham replied, 'My child, remember that you received what was good during your lifetime while Lazarus likewise received what was bad; but now he is comforted here, whereas you are tormented. ²⁶ Moreover, between us and you a **great chasm is established** to prevent anyone from crossing who might wish to go from our side to yours or from your side to ours.' [*New American Bible, Revised Edition*. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Lk 16:25–26.] Dylan's lyric very clearly has to do with helping the smug and privileged cross over (*democratization*) and to experience the world as the "useless bum" does. But first he has to challenge the smug, forcing them **to experience the social chasm that they establish and maintain ...** to their advantage.

¹¹ "**doll**" – See comment below. But it is only here that we learn that the person to whom Dylan is addressing himself is *a woman*. It is possible that he had a particular woman in mind, or a kind of woman among whom he often was. But if we follow Curtis, then we may conclude that Dylan is bringing into play the American myth of the "high born/high society" woman of privilege and the "low born/blue collar" man – the American "working man" (decent, hard-working, hard beset by elites who esteem little his excellence and commitment to do a good job and to raise his family). The American myth, but really a structure of story common in fairy tales, is that such a man falls in love with such a woman, and she, eventually, falls in love with him, which "redeems" her from her elitism and introduces her, and welcomes her, into the society of "the common man." In Don Mclean's song, "Castles in the Air", he is struggling with a high-society woman who desires to bring Mclean *upward*, now becoming a wealthy rock star, into her elitist society – "the cocktail generation" he calls them: "For I cannot be part of the cocktail generation / Partners waltz devoid of all romance / The music plays and everyone must dance / I'm bowing out, I need a second chance." **Don Mclean's album *Tapestry* (released 1970)**, the first song of which is "Castles in the Air."

¹² "**People'd call**" – The colloquial "doll" would suggest that those doing the warning are of the say lifestyle as she, the woman in this song being warned.

¹³ "**You thought**" – Don't miss that "thought" *is in the past tense*. In other words, the woman to whom he is directing this lyric is in a very different social circumstance than she was before. Elitist culture is always about thinking, about "what people think" about this or that. It is grounded "in the head" and too often far from the "heart" (from feeling). Notice therefore the central significance of the question, "**How does it feel?**"

¹⁴ "**all**" – Dylan indicates that it was not just one or two people who warned her about her arrogance of life and especially in relation to the "unknown" and "homeless" of the world. I think of Jesus, again in that story at Luke 16 about the Rich Man and Lazarus, and how it concludes with this: ³¹ Then Abraham said, 'If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead.' " [*New American Bible, Revised Edition*. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Lk 16:31.]

¹⁵ "**kiddin' you**" – The colloquial "kiddin'" form of this verb is Dylan at his craft. Such slang ways of speaking often imply self-satisfaction in the one speaking in this way. He or she does not have to use language properly, carefully with others, because he or she feels secure and privileged, within a close-knit group of like-minded people.

¹⁶ "**you used to laugh about**" – Again, Dylan's use of the past tense "you used to" is powerful. In other words, Dylan is addressing this to an unnamed woman who has crossed the social chasm upon which her arrogance depended. He is not letting her re-interpret her former "high estate" in society; that is, to excuse herself,

Everybody that was hangin' out¹⁷
Now¹⁸ you don't talk so loud
Now you don't seem so proud
About having to be scrounging¹⁹ for your next meal²⁰

How does it feel?²¹
How does it feel

to say to herself "I was not really like that." But, as we will see, he is trying to find her where now she finds herself, in her completely bewildered and "fallen" state of life, and there to teach and to console her. Her "fall from grace" (in the social elitism sense of this) allows her to put back together the world that her elitism had so drastically divided.

¹⁷ "**hangin' out**" – This colloquial expression is usually the answer to the question, "So, what you are doing?" "Oh, we're just hangin' out." It suggests an irresponsible wasting of the time that one has been given to do what is worth doing. It also belies an *attitude* of unfeeling dismissal of everyone who is being responsible, and especially being responsible for others.

¹⁸ "**Now**" – this is repeated twice, in this line and the next. It has all the power of a JUDGEMENT directed at an elitist and exclusive life. This "now" is chilling to any of us who imagine that we'll get around to conversion sometime, but no rush. Suddenly the "now" has come. This use of "now" is exactly the same "now" of the last section of **the Beatitudes in Luke's Gospel 6:24-26**:

²⁴ But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

²⁵ But woe to you who are filled **now**,
for you will be hungry.

Woe to you who laugh **now**,
for you will grieve and weep.

²⁶ Woe to you when all speak well of you,
for their ancestors treated the false prophets in this way. ¹⁸

¹⁹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the verb "**to scrounge**" – "*intransitive*. To seek to obtain by irregular means, as by stealth or begging; to hunt about or rummage (*for* something)." To "scrounge", the *sound* of the verb itself, suggests low-class, dirty, illegal, etc. Dylan is highly attuned to what sound does in the ears of those hearing. This is what Curtis highlights in the seminal work of Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980, esp. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, published 1964), who articulated a fundamental shift in American culture from literary culture (what one reads, and therefore how one uses one's eyes to get informed) to a sonic culture (what one hears, and therefore the priority of one's ears). **We think about what we read; we are moved, provoked by what we hear.**

²⁰ "**scrounge your next meal**" - Dylan's tone here is as sharp as can be. It is difficult to understand, until in one's life one *does* understand, that being forced to face one's truth – the pain of self-knowledge, which a great percentage of people in my experience avoid all their life: both the pain ... and the self-knowledge – is actually an important step to being able to be consoled in the right meaning of "consolation." Very often we seek to "console" what is in fact the false self – that of oneself and of others.

²¹ "**How does it feel?**" – This is *the* Question that Dylan addresses. To use McLuhan's perspective, in literate culture, one *thinks*, has opinions; one does not need to *feel*. But in "sonic" (my word) culture – McLuhan

To be without a home²²
Like a complete unknown²³
Like a rolling stone²⁴?

speaks of “electric culture” (as in electric guitars; TV; radio, etc.) – *one reacts, feels things, is provoked*. The problem with elitist culture is how deeply linked it is to literate culture (to books, to codes of law, to traditional education, etc.), and how it allows cultural elites *to fail in feeling* for those who are not elite, who never could be elite even if they wanted to (because elite culture *must* exclude others), who are uneducated – we call them “illiterate”. The only way the cultural chasm can be bridged, and eventually closed, **is for elite culture to be forced to feel** “for the plight of his or her fellow man”: “to be on your own / with no direction home / like a complete unknown....” Elite culture may like to talk about “the poor” and like to be seen doing so. But it will always be impossible for elites to know the poor unless he or she is forced to feel what it is like to be them, feeling that not as a “tourist” among them but as a humble student who wishes to understand and to be changed. Without this **affect-laden insight** (Loneragan), he or she will always remain just another elitist. The Black Lives Matter deal, at root, is the failure of elite culture to feel what Blacks have experienced, over and over and over again in American culture – to feel what it is like to be Black in America. This issue is just one of countless others in any society. I myself knew with painful clarity how most people had not the slightest idea what it has been like to be a Catholic Priest in contemporary times. Most people assume that they already knew all about this, or else judge that it is not necessary for them to care about knowing anything about this. “How does it feel?”

²² “**to be without a home**” – I sense Dylan’s highly ambivalent relation to “home” of any kind. He, as does any human being, long for home. But the problem is that all options out there for a suitable “home” are not sufficient – meant not as a judgment against the “home” of other people, but simply as felt by Dylan. There is something in Dylan that enjoys not being “homed” anywhere, not because it is fun to be homeless, but because it appeals to his iconoclastic nature to be “free” of such “belonging”.

²³ “**like a complete unknown**” – At an emotional level, saying that one feels like “a complete unknown” is difficult, painful to acknowledge about oneself. Yet, from another perspective, one who is “a complete unknown”, as Dylan was when he first arrived in New York City, has a great capacity to surprise people!

²⁴ “**like a rolling stone**” – It is interesting that this is the title that Dylan chose for his song. He might have chosen, “How does it feel?” Notice how “like” is used in both examples he uses in the chorus. The main thought is *being without a home*. The two **similes** are meant to enrich access to what Dylan means by being without a home. Further, what is “a rolling stone” like? We have the expression, “a rolling stone gathers no moss”, which I am assuming is what Dylan has in mind here. “Moss”, presumably, is something that proves that one has become static, stuck, unchangeable, in a rut. When one recognizes how Dylan profoundly jolted the Folk Music world, of which he had so quickly become the King, by the singing of this very song, we intuit that Dylan is loudly claiming that “no one owns me”; “I reject being categorized as a ‘Folk musician’, even though you want to crown me the greatest of them all.” See the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of “**rolling stone**” at the head of my work on this text.

You've gone to the finest school²⁵ all right, Miss Lonely²⁶
But you know you only used to get juiced²⁷ in it
And nobody has ever taught you how to live on the street²⁸
And now you find out you're gonna have to get used to it²⁹
You said you'd never compromise³⁰

²⁵ **“the finest school”** – Dylan did not like his formal schooling, finding it deadening. Yet, we learn that for two or three years in the early 60s, he read widely and diligently in History, Philosophy, Art, etc. The issue with formal schooling in America was that it appealed too much to *learning* stuff rather than *feeling* reality as it is. Again, “How does it feel?” is addressed, not necessarily in a condemnatory way to a person who has a malformed sensibility, who simply is unable to feel what he or she should feel.

²⁶ **“Miss Lonely”** – Curtis links this to the 1933 novel by Nathaniel West called *Miss Lonelyhearts*: “Miss Lonelyhearts is a man who writes what Sherlock Holmes would have called an “agony column” for a newspaper that is unnamed, just as Miss Lonelyhearts himself is never named. **It is his profession as a writer to provide compassion to those who pour out their hearts to him in long letters—and this feature may well be what made the book significant for Dylan, who felt so much compassion for so many at the time.** *Miss Lonelyhearts* has no plot, because West strings together the weird chapters of his novel very much as Dylan strings together the weird verses of his songs. **Neither writer felt constrained by the demands of plot and story.** [Curtis, Jim. *Decoding Dylan* (p. 46). McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers. Kindle Edition.]

²⁷ **“to get juiced”** is a slang expression for “being under the influence of alcohol.” How clear it was to me the blight of alcohol on college campuses, and how accepted a habit it was for students to “get juiced” at least once a week. I wanted to grab them by the collar and say, “Do you have any idea how expensive your college education is?!” The most important aspect of “getting juiced”, I think, is that it is a practice of *anaesthetization* – a widely practiced habit among too many people. Perhaps this is Dylan’s point: how alcohol, and other such things, deaden a person’s ability to be awake, to be able to pay attention to what really is going on.

²⁸ **“no one has ever taught you”** – I am reminded of the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15, and especially when the younger son finds himself “on his own / with no direction home”, finding himself living among pigs and wanting to compete for their slop for his food, it is said of him - ¹⁶ And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, **but nobody gave him any.** [*New American Bible, Revised Edition.* (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), **Lk 15:16.**] Compare the helplessness of the younger son in the Parable and the lostness/helplessness of the woman to whom Dylan is addressing this song, a woman who has no idea how to live on the streets. But “living on the streets” for Dylan is not primarily in this song about being homeless; rather it about what happens when a person of privilege, and elite, suddenly recognizes that there has been a whole world functioning “under” him or her, a world such a person “knows about” but when such a person has no real feeling for what it is like to be lost and homeless.

²⁹ **“have to get used to it”** – This again is Dylan expressing how suddenly “trapped” a person is who has lost his or her elite smugness and social location “above” the rest of humanity. This echoes emotionally the “now” (twice) at the end of the first stanza.

³⁰ **“never compromise”** – Compromise is an essential skill of a successful, alive, engaged human being. The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the noun **“compromise”** – “A coming to terms, or arrangement of a dispute, by concessions on both sides; **partial surrender of one's position, for the sake of coming to terms**; the concession or terms offered by either side.” Those who have never suffered extended poverty and social invisibility look at those who do suffer those things with horror, with revulsion. And instead of wanting to find a way **to understand** such people, their plight (not so that they might be pitied, but so that might be sufficiently “seen” and

With the mystery tramp,³¹ but now you realize
He's not selling any alibis
As you stare into the vacuum of his eyes³²
And ask him do you want to make a deal?³³

How does it feel?
How does it feel
To be on your own
With no direction home
Like a complete unknown
Like a rolling stone?

understood), the elite (which in this case can refer to anyone who is not suffering the plight of the habitually poor and/or dispossessed or “ghosted”) offer **their analysis of why such people are in the plight that they are**. There is not real *feeling* in such an approach to the otherness of the poor and the dispossessed.

³¹ **“the mystery tramp”** – Dylan has used the term “bum” and now here uses the word “tramp.” It is a vocabulary of disdain used by “normal” people who feel superior to these miserable wretches. I think that all Dylan means by “mystery” here is “incomprehensible”. The *Oxford English Dictionary* at **“tramp”** – “A person on the tramp; = trampler n. 2; one who travels from place to place on foot, in search of employment, or as a vagrant; also, one who follows an itinerant business, as a hawker, etc.” But in American English, **“tramp”** is a judgmental label, a harsh label attached to a “nobody”, a “vagrant”, a “bum”. One hears the “bite” of this derogatory term when it is applied to “a sexually promiscuous woman”.

³² **“the vacuum of his eyes”** - This description is one of the most heartbreaking of the song. It is a description saturated with compassion for people so broken that they no longer try to give reasons (“alibis”) who did this to them, or why they are where they are. But then Dylan makes us look with him **“into the vacuum of their eyes”**. This is where one feels deepest the heartbreak. For this reason, most people will not look into the eyes of people on the street.

³³ **“Do you want to make a deal?”** – It is unclear to me what Dylan means by this. But perhaps it has to do with the way of do-gooders, who are quick to think of the “solution” to the vagrant’s problems. “If you just do this, then all will be better! Do we have a deal that you will follow my advice?” I think it is something like this. But the resounding problem of this approach is the one being offered “help” is being offered it by a helper who has failed to understand even the tiniest part of the realities that the “bum” faces each day, and why. God save any of us from such ignorant and clueless “helpers”. But what is most important here is that Dylan is addressing a woman who has “lost everything”, who is now on the streets “scrounging”, which is what causes her for the first time actually to look into the face of those like her – the lost, the invisible, the homeless – *and to ask their help* (the **“deal”** to which Dylan refers – perhaps, “If I sleep with you, then will you, in exchange, give me a place to stay?”).

You never turned around to see the frowns on the jugglers and the clowns³⁴
When they all come down and did tricks for you³⁵
You never understood³⁶ that it ain't no good
You shouldn't let other people get your kicks for you³⁷
You used to ride on the chrome horse with your diplomat
Who carried on his shoulder a Siamese cat³⁸
Ain't it hard when you discover that³⁹

³⁴ “**the jugglers and the clowns**” – This starts to get complicated. Dylan likes to string together images, which if one tried to “translate” each of them – this means that – one would be missing the point of the lyrics. The concatenation of diverse images is meant, all of them clashing with each other, to evoke a feeling, to begin to catalyze an insight into reality. But, in this case, I think that what Dylan is after here is how people on the streets perform some act – juggling, clowning, playing music and singing, etc. – so that people walking by might toss some coins into their hat. Recall in the first verse, line two, Dylan speaks of the woman “throwing” a coin at a “bum”. So, perhaps, the woman of Dylan’s song tosses or “throws” in a meager amount, an insultingly meager amount in relation to her capacity, and then continues walking feeling self-satisfied that she “gave money to the poor” today. But if she looked around and saw the reaction of those receiving her “largess”, she would see frowns of disgust.

³⁵ “**tricks**” – I do not think it inappropriate to hear in this noun a reference to the exchange of sexual “favors” (i.e., “doing tricks” – a slang expression for prostitution). In one word, Dylan is bringing us deeper into the reality of the streets, what people feel compelled to do by their circumstances.

³⁶ “**you never understood**” – It is important to notice Dylan’s skillful use of verb tense – “understood” (i.e., in the past, or at least up to now). But, I think, what Dylan hopes is that **now** she *will* understand, which would be a great victory. Dylan could have stopped with this statement, because that is what this song returns to over and over again. And the reason a person “never understands” is that he or she is unable or unwilling to feel the reality of others, especially those of a “lower class”. Remember here how Dylan is playing with the American “trope” of *democratization* (bringing the high down to the lowly). Perhaps what we can recall here is the biblical teaching, in many places, that God is One who “casts the mighty down from their thrones ... Who raises up the lowly.”

³⁷ “**let other people get your kicks for you**” – A piling on of images, for the purpose of opening in the listener a particular insight. What this image evokes in me is what Neil Postman addresses in his *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985; 1987). The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the noun “**kicks**” – “A strong or sharp stimulant effect, esp. that of liquor or drugs; *spec.* something that makes a drink potent; a thrill, excitement, pleasure; a feeling of marked enjoyment or the cause of such enjoyment; esp. in *to get a kick out of* (something), to be excited or pleased by, to enjoy; *for kicks*, purely for pleasure or excitement, *frequently recklessly or irresponsibly.*” I recall here Aldous Huxley’s famous novel, *A Brave New World*, and his description of “the feelies”- about a world, our world, that “lives for” constant stimulation of vivid feelings.

³⁸ “**You used to ride on the chrome horse**” – I think that this rhyme – “diplomat” and “Siamese cat” is Dylan being playful; a mocking playfulness with words. But the “chrome horse” is a reference, I am guessing, to a man with “a nice car”, in which she loves to be riding and with a “distinguished” (“diplomat”) man. It is all for show, but perhaps with no real feeling in it; nothing to do with love and responsibility and joy present inside a well-built friendship.

³⁹ “**when you discover that**” – The preceding “ain’t” is, again, Dylan’s deliberate use of “illiterate” English – in the way that Woody Guthrie used it too – to authentically voice what the uneducated, the voiceless people of

He really wasn't where it's at
After he took from you everything he could steal⁴⁰

How does it feel?
How does it feel
To be on your own
With no direction home
Like a complete unknown
Like a rolling stone?

the streets actually talk like. “**You discover that**” – Notice how much Dylan weaves *compassion* for her who has “lost everything” and against her expectation. She thought that she had it made! Her ability to discover a wider truth about reality is *her in the process of genuine learning*! And genuine learning is something that would be high in Dylan’s esteem. Recall the endless circling of the smug and complacent addressed in an earlier song: “How many times must a cannon ball strike?, etc.” They never learn!

⁴⁰ “**and he took you for everything**” – Such “bite” to these lines! But this wretch of a man – with his Siamese cat and fast car – is just as lost as the woman to whom Dylan addresses his song. She thought that she was using him – making her look good; making her appear that she had “made it” – and it turns out that he was using her as well. They both, because of their superficialities, were so susceptible to being manipulated by the other. Still, Dylan’s description here is stunningly tart. It has the sound of Amos the Prophet.

Princess on the steeple and all the pretty⁴¹ people⁴²
They're drinkin'⁴³, thinkin' that they got it made⁴⁴
Exchanging all kinds of precious gifts and things⁴⁵

⁴¹ “pretty” – It is worth noticing across all cultures that “beauty” is associated with “better”, as in “better than” those who are not comely. Recall the powerful song of Janis Ian – “Seventeen” (1975), which is a brilliant evocation of what it feels like for a girl (in this case) to be overlooked completely, or pitied, by those who are “pretty”. Recall here also that “painter of the soul” Rembrandt, who was deeply committed to painting people as they actually looked – not sanitizing their looks, or as we say today, “air brushing” photographs. In his time, people did not look “healthy” at all in the way that we Americans demand of ourselves to look, scorning those who do not “look healthy”, looking down on them.

⁴² “Princess on the steeple” – What image Dylan particularly has in mind here is unclear. Though I think his primary point lies in that word “princess” – a woman who likes being “a princess” (a vile and ill-suited habit for any girl to fall into). “Steeple” suggests a castle structure, but I think his playful point is to get a rhyme with “people”, which paints the image of the self-flattering elites who imagine themselves to be way “higher” in importance and stature than “the simple folk” (“What do the simple folk do?”, in the movie *Camelot*). But this image also suggests to me one of the Temptations that the Tempter directed at Jesus at the end of his 40-days of fasting in the wilderness. See **Matthew 4:** - ⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and made him stand **on the parapet of the temple**, 6 and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. [*New American Bible, Revised Edition*. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Mt 4:5–6.] Perhaps the heart of this particular Temptation was getting Jesus to choose to assume a position “above” the rest of humanity.

⁴³ “They're drinkin'” – I remember as a little boy, when watching shows and movie on TV, noticing how “high society” people (those who “got it made”) were heavily linked to constant smoking (tobacco) and drinking (cocktails), and who made these vices fashionable, signs of membership in the “inner ring” (see footnote below).

⁴⁴ “thinkin' that they got it made” – A colloquialism, but one very familiar to me in my life. The smugness and self-praising ways of those who know that “they have got it made” are people who have brought much suffering into my life over the decades (and not mine alone, of course!). C.S. Lewis in a trenchant, powerful, and significant lecture given in 1944 at King's College London – the lecture called “**The Inner Ring**” – illuminates the power “those who got it made” have, but the nature of that power and why they have it ... and at what personal cost to themselves. **But the main thing about this: it is everyone's (!) desire to “make it”, finally to be one of those of “the inner ring”, that gives to those of the inner ring such power! Their power is grounded in those of us outside the inner ring who envy them, who speak of them as having “unfair advantages” (which of course is true, but it is not the point).** The only way to defeat this inner sickness is to replace the desire to belong among those of the inner ring is to set out on a difficult journey, but the only one worth taking: the journey towards one's true self.

⁴⁵ “precious gifts and things” – Dylan's craft again on display. By so closely linking “precious gifts” with (mere) “things” is to gut the former of its, well, preciousness. The main point is that genuine persons, those who know what is truly precious (such as becoming a real person, a genuine, loving, self-giving person), “exchange selves” not “gifts and things.” I remember how often I noticed the inner complexity in high school students who received “precious gifts and things” from their hard-working parents (for example), but who so rarely had their parents be *with* them, to walk *with* them and to teach them.

But you'd better lift your diamond ring,⁴⁶ you'd better pawn it babe⁴⁷
You used to be so amused
At Napoleon in rags and the language that he used⁴⁸
Go to him now, he calls you, you can't refuse⁴⁹

⁴⁶ “**your diamond ring**” – Dylan’s point here is not the preciousness of a diamond ring. Rather he is referring to it as a wedding ring – her falling for the trap of marrying a “diplomat” (a man with flash and “high” station) so that she can “make it”, but who is marrying her as a “trophy” (if you will) and who, as Dylan earlier said will “take from her everything he can steal”.

⁴⁷ “**lift**” ... “**pawn**” ... “**babe**” – Dylan using street slang. What that “diamond ring” on her finger is for the woman who has now “lost everything” a symbol of her refusal fully to accept that she has “lost everything”. She holds onto, will not let go of, her diamond ring. “I’ve been forced to let go of everything, but I will *not* let go of my ring!” Something so wise in what Dylan is perceiving: as long as she clings to her former “high” station (symbolized by the ring on her finger), her current arrival into a “low” station will continue to damage and hurt her. She must learn the language of the street (thus Dylan’s use of that language – he is teaching her!) and fully enter into it. Dylan is saying, if you will, “Girl, let go of everything. Now. Only then can you begin to get free of the power “elitism” has had on you”.

⁴⁸ **Napoleon Bonaparte**, on 20 April 1814, spoke his valedictory to his loyal soldiers – the Old Guard – after which he was banished in exile on the Island of Elba. His words were these: “Soldiers of my Old Guard: I bid you farewell. For twenty years I have constantly accompanied you on the road to honor and glory. In these latter times, as in the days of our prosperity, you have invariably been models of courage and fidelity. With men such as you our cause could not be lost; but the war would have been interminable; it would have been civil war, and that would have entailed deeper misfortunes on France. I have sacrificed all of my interests to those of the country. I go, but you, my friends, will continue to serve France. Her happiness was my only thought. It will still be the object of my wishes. Do not regret my fate; if I have consented to survive, it is to serve your glory. I intend to write the history of the great achievements we have performed together. Adieu, my friends. Would I could press you all to my heart.” Dylan recalls that the great Napoleon assumed the position of Emperor of France after he had escaped from his exile on the Island of Elba and retook control of France ... but only for 100 days. He was then defeated in battle by the combined armies of England and Prussia – the Battle of Waterloo on 18 June 1815. Dylan’s point, I think, is that if even an Emperor can suffer the loss of everything, his clothes left in rags, then anyone can suffer the same fate ... whose sin of presumption causes him or her to imagine themselves a “higher” kind of person than others.

⁴⁹ “**Go to him now, he calls you**” – A somewhat spooky evocation here – the dead Napoleon calling from the dead to her. I am not sure what Dylan means by this, except perhaps that all of us are “fascinated” by the downfall of others, but especially those of “high station.” It is not just about gawking; it is something about “an object lesson” that we feel being taught us when the “untouchable” among us, those whose power makes them safe from the “troubles” that those lower in station must deal with every day, suffer such a calamity – the loss of everything.

When you got nothing, you got nothing to lose⁵⁰
You're invisible now,⁵¹ you got no secrets to conceal⁵²

How does it feel?
How does it feel
To be on your own
With no direction home

⁵⁰ “**nothing to lose**” – A magnificent line. When we are on the receiving end of terrible loss “of everything”, we, in this line that Dylan writes, notice the *loss*. But what Dylan is getting at is the possibility, if we let it happen, that the “loss of everything” can become an experience, finally, of **beginning to become free**. We are no longer “owned” by anyone, because no one cares about us anymore (we have no “station”). Fr. Gary Uhlenkott, SJ wrote a prayer that prays at every Eucharist that he celebrates, a prayer that he says as a conclusion of the Penitential Rite (the “Kyrie”, the “Lord, have mercy”). His prayer reads: “You give us so many gifts, and often we don’t recognize them. Often we are afraid to accept Your gifts for fear that our lives will be changed. And so often we are reluctant to share with others what we have been given for fear that we might be left with nothing but You.” I recall also the Fourth Song of the Servant in **Isaiah 52:13 to 53:12**, who is the very embodiment of “When you’ve got nothing” –

He had no majestic bearing to catch our eye,
no beauty to draw us to him.

³He was spurned and avoided by men,
a man of suffering, knowing pain,
Like one from whom you turn your face,
spurned, and we held him in no esteem.

⁴Yet it was our pain that he bore,
our sufferings he endured.
We thought of him as stricken,
struck down by God^r and afflicted.... (NABRE, Isaiah 53:2-4)

⁵¹ “**you’re invisible now**” – Notice, again, how Dylan’s “voices” this in the song and the significance of his use of “now”. It is an intensely painful experience to be “made invisible” by people who feel better about themselves if they engage in this kind of ugliness. And, I have been assured by those on the street that one of the most painful experiences “out there” is to be “made invisible” by the “regular”, by the “normal” people who won’t even look them in the face or give any acknowledgment that he or she is right there.

⁵² “**you got no secrets to reveal**” – Dylan’s keen perception about the price exacted in people who have “secrets” – everyone does, until they do not. The “big” secrets people carry force them to “split” themselves into a public, agreeable self and a hidden, shamed, hurt, and afraid self. Jesus was enormously perceptive about this, and He knew exactly how to invite people out of their secrets not by having them tell Him their secrets (He already knew what they were, or likely were), but by having them trust Him. Dylan appeals to this woman who has lost everything and invites her to reflect, again, “How does it feel?” ... not to be owned by anyone; no longer to have secrets to hide; to be, well, *free*? It is as if Dylan is saying to her, “It is not as bad as you thought to lose everything, is it? Sure, it is bad in one way, but in other more important ways it is a profound relief no longer to have to walk among so much illusion and subterfuge, among those who really imagine themselves as superior, who “got it made.”

Like a complete unknown
Like a rolling stone?