**Bob Dylan Has a Lot on His Mind**

In a rare interview, the Nobel Prize winner discusses mortality, drawing inspiration from the past, and his new album, “Rough and Rowdy Ways.”

A few years ago, sitting beneath shade trees in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., I had a two-hour discussion with Bob Dylan that touched on Malcolm X, the French Revolution, Franklin Roosevelt and World War II. At one juncture, he asked me what I knew about the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864. When I answered, “Not enough,” he got up from his folding chair, climbed into his tour bus, and came back five minutes later with photocopies describing how U.S. troops had butchered hundreds of peaceful Cheyenne and Arapahoe in southeastern Colorado.

Given the nature of our relationship, I felt comfortable reaching out to him in April after, in the midst of the coronavirus crisis, he unexpectedly released his epic, 17-minute song “Murder Most Foul,” about the Kennedy assassination. Even though he hadn’t done a major interview outside of his own website since winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2016, he agreed to a phone chat from his Malibu home, which turned out to be his only interview before next Friday’s release of “Rough and Rowdy Ways,” his first album of original songs since “Tempest” in 2012.

Like most conversations with Dylan, “Rough and Rowdy Ways” covers complex territory: trances and hymns, defiant blues, love longings, comic juxtapositions, prankster wordplay, patriotic ardor, maverick steadfastness, lyrical Cubism, twilight-age reflections and spiritual contentment.

In the high-octane showstopper “Goodbye Jimmy Reed,” Dylan honors the Mississippi bluesman with dragon-fierce harmonica riffs and bawdy lyrics. In the slow blues “Crossing the Rubicon,” he feels “the bones beneath my skin” and considers his options before death: “Three miles north of purgatory — one step from the great beyond/I prayed to the cross and I kissed the girls and I crossed the Rubicon.”

“Mother of Muses” is a hymn to the natural world, gospel choirs and military men like William Tecumseh Sherman and George Patton, “who cleared the path for Presley to sing/who cleared the path for Martin Luther King.” And “Key West (Philosopher’s Pirate),” is an ethereal meditation on immortality set on a drive down Route 1 to the Florida Keys, with Donnie Herron’s accordion channeling the Band’s Garth Hudson. In it he pays homage to, “Ginsberg, Corso and Kerouac.”

Perhaps someday he’ll write a song or paint a picture to honor George Floyd. In the 1960s and 1970s, following the work of black leaders of the civil rights movement, Dylan also worked to expose the arrogance of white privilege and the viciousness of racial hatred in America through songs like “George Jackson,” “Only a Pawn in Their Game,” and “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll.” One of his most fierce lines about policing and race came in his 1976 ballad “Hurricane”: “In Paterson that’s just the way things go/If you’re black you might as well not show up on the street/Unless you want to draw the heat.”

I had a brief follow-up with Dylan, 79, one day after Floyd was killed in Minneapolis. Clearly shaken by the horror that had occurred in his home state, he sounded depressed. “It sickened me no end to see George tortured to death like that,” he said. “It was beyond ugly. Let’s hope that justice comes swift for the Floyd family and for the nation.”

These are edited excerpts from the two conversations.

**Was "Murder Most Foul" written as a nostalgic eulogy for a long-lost time?**

To me it's not nostalgic. I don't think of "Murder Most Foul" as a glorification of the past or some kind of send-off to a lost age. It speaks to me in the moment. It always did, especially when I was writing the lyrics out.

**Somebody auctioned off a sheaf of unpublished transcripts in the 1990s that you wrote about J.F.K.'s murder. Were those prose notes for an essay or were you hoping to write a song like "Murder Most Foul" for a long time?**

I'm not aware of ever wanting to write a song about J.F.K. A lot of those auctioned-off documents have been forged. The forgeries are easy to spot because somebody always signs my name on the bottom.

**Were you surprised that this 17-minute-long song was your first No. 1 Billboard hit?**

I was, yeah.

**"I Contain Multitudes" has a powerful line: "I sleep with life and death in the same bed." I suppose we all feel that way when we hit a certain age. Do you think about mortality often?**

I think about the death of the human race. The long strange trip of the naked ape. Not to be light on it, but everybody's life is so transient. Every human being, no matter how strong or mighty, is frail when it comes to death. I think about it in general terms, not in a personal way.

**There is a lot of apocalyptic sentiment in "Murder Most Foul." Are you worried that in 2020 we're past the point of no return? That technology and hyper-industrialization are going to work against human life on Earth?**

Sure, there's a lot of reasons to be apprehensive about that. There's definitely a lot more anxiety and nervousness around now than there used to be. But that only applies to people of a certain age like me and you, Doug. We have a tendency to live in the past, but that's only us. Youngsters don't have that tendency. They have no past, so all they know is what they see and hear, and they'll believe anything. In 20 or 30 years from now, they'll be at the forefront. When you see somebody that is 10 years old, he's going to be in control in 20 or 30 years, and he won't have a clue about the world we knew. Young people who are in their teens now have no memory lane to remember. So it's probably best to get into that mind-set as soon as we can, because that's going to be the reality.

As far as technology goes, it makes everybody vulnerable. But young people don't think like that. They could care less. Telecommunications and advanced technology is the world they were born into. Our world is already obsolete.

**A line in "False Prophet" — "I'm the last of the best — you can bury the rest" — reminded me of the recent deaths of John Prine and Little Richard. Did you listen to their music after they passed as a kind of tribute?**

Both of those guys were triumphant in their work. They don't need anybody doing tributes. Everybody knows what they did and who they were. And they deserve all the respect and acclaim that they received. No doubt about it. But Little Richard I grew up with. And he was there before me. Lit a match under me. Tuned me into things I never would have known on my own. So I think of him differently. John came after me. So it's not the same thing. I acknowledge them differently.

**Why didn't more people pay attention to Little Richard's gospel music?**

Probably because gospel music is the music of good news and in these days there just isn't any. Good news in today's world is like a fugitive, treated like a hoodlum and put on the run. Castigated. All we see is good-for-nothing news. And we have to thank the media industry for that. It stirs people up. Gossip and dirty laundry. Dark news that depresses and horrifies you.

On the other hand, gospel news is exemplary. It can give you courage. You can pace your life accordingly, or try to, anyway. And you can do it with honor and principles. There are theories of truth in gospel but to most people it's unimportant. Their lives are lived out too fast. Too many bad influences. Sex and politics and murder is the way to go if you want to get people's attention. It excites us, that's our problem.

Little Richard was a great gospel singer. But I think he was looked at as an outsider or an interloper in the gospel world. They didn't accept him there. And of course the rock 'n' roll world wanted to keep him singing "Good Golly, Miss Molly." So his gospel music wasn't accepted in either world. I think the same thing happened to Sister Rosetta Tharpe. I can't imagine either of them being bothered too much about it. Both are what we used to call people of high character. Genuine, plenty talented and who knew themselves, weren't swayed by anything from the outside. Little Richard, I know was like that.

But so was Robert Johnson, even more so. Robert was one of the most inventive geniuses of all time. But he probably had no audience to speak of. He was so far ahead of his time that we still haven't caught up with him. His status today couldn't be any higher. Yet in his day, his songs must have confused people. It just goes to show you that great people follow their own path.

**On the album "Tempest" you perform "Roll on John" as a tribute to John Lennon. Is there another person you'd like to write a ballad for?**

Those kinds of songs for me just come out of the blue, out of thin air. I never plan to write any of them. But in saying that, there are certain public figures that are just in your subconscious for one reason or another. None of those songs with designated names are intentionally written. They just fall down from space. I'm just as bewildered as anybody else as to why I write them. The folk tradition has a long history of songs about people, though. John Henry, Mr. Garfield, Roosevelt. I guess I'm just locked into that tradition.

**You honor many great recording artists in your songs. Your mention of Don Henley and Glenn Frey on "Murder Most Foul" came off as a bit of a surprise to me. What Eagles songs do you enjoy the most?**

"New Kid in Town," "Life in the Fast Lane," "Pretty Maids All in a Row." That could be one of the best songs ever.

**You also refer to Art Pepper, Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, Thelonious Monk, Oscar Peterson and Stan Getz in "Murder Most Foul." How has jazz inspired you as a songwriter and poet over your long career? Are there jazz artists you've been listening to lately?**

Maybe Miles's early stuff on Capitol Records. But what's jazz? Dixieland, bebop, high-speed fusion? What do you call jazz? Is it Sonny Rollins? I like Sonny's calypso stuff but is that jazz? Jo Stafford, Joni James, Kay Starr — I think they were all jazz singers. King Pleasure, that's my idea of a jazz singer. I don't know, you can put anything into that category. Jazz goes back to the Roaring Twenties. Paul Whiteman was called the king of jazz. I'm sure if you asked Lester Young he wouldn't know what you're talking about.

Has any of it ever inspired me? Well yeah. Probably a lot. Ella Fitzgerald as a singer inspires me. Oscar Peterson as a piano player, absolutely. Has any of it inspired me as a songwriter? Yeah, "Ruby, My Dear" by Monk. That song set me off in some direction to do something along those lines. I remember listening to that over and over.

**What role does improvisation play in your music?**

None at all. There's no way you can change the nature of a song once you've invented it. You can set different guitar or piano patterns upon the structural lines and go from there, but that's not improvisation. Improvisation leaves you open to good or bad performances and the idea is to stay consistent. You basically play the same thing time after time in the most perfect way you can.

"I Contain Multitudes" is surprisingly autobiographical in parts. The last two verses exude a take-no-prisoners stoicism while the rest of the song is a humorous confessional. Did you have fun grappling with contradictory impulses of yourself and human nature in general?

I didn't really have to grapple much. It's the kind of thing where you pile up stream-of-consciousness verses and then leave it alone and come pull things out. In that particular song, the last few verses came first. So that's where the song was going all along. Obviously, the catalyst for the song is the title line. It's one of those where you write it on instinct. Kind of in a trance state. Most of my recent songs are like that. The lyrics are the real thing, tangible, they're not metaphors. The songs seem to know themselves and they know that I can sing them, vocally and rhythmically. They kind of write themselves and count on me to sing them.

**Once again in this song you name a lot of people. What made you decide to mention Anne Frank next to Indiana Jones?**

Her story means a lot. It's profound. And hard to articulate or paraphrase, especially in modern culture. Everybody's got such a short attention span. But you're taking Anne's name out of context, she's part of a trilogy. You could just as well ask, "What made you decide to include Indiana Jones or the Rolling Stones?" The names themselves are not solitary. It's the combination of them that adds up to something more than their singular parts. To go too much into detail is irrelevant. The song is like a painting, you can't see it all at once if you're standing too close. The individual pieces are just part of a whole.

"I Contain Multitudes" is more like trance writing. Well, it's not more like trance writing, it is trance writing. It's the way I actually feel about things. It is my identity and I'm not going to question it, I am

in no position to. Every line has a particular purpose. Somewhere in the universe those three names must have paid a price for what they represent and they're locked together. And I can hardly explain that. Why or where or how, but those are the facts.

**But Indiana Jones was a fictional character?**

Yeah, but the John Williams score brought him to life. Without that music it wouldn't have been much of a movie. It's the music which makes Indy come alive. So that maybe is one of the reasons he is in the song. I don't know, all three names came at once.

**A reference to the Rolling Stones makes it into "I Contain Multitudes." Just as a lark, which Stones songs do you wish you could've written?**

Oh, I don't know, maybe "Angie," "Ventilator Blues" and what else, let me see. Oh yeah, "Wild Horses."

**Charlie Sexton began playing with you for a few years in 1999, and returned to the fold in 2009. What makes him such a special player? It's as if you can read each other's minds.**

As far as Charlie goes, he can read anybody's mind. Charlie, though, creates songs and sings them as well, and he can play guitar to beat the band. There aren't any of my songs that Charlie doesn't feel part of and he's always played great with me. "False Prophet" is only one of three 12-bar structural things on this record. Charlie is good on all the songs. He's not a show-off guitar player, although he can do that if he wants. He's very restrained in his playing but can be explosive when he wants to be. It's a classic style of playing. Very old school. He inhabits a song rather than attacking it. He's always done that with me.

**How have you spent the last couple of months home-sheltered in Malibu? Have you been able to weld or paint?**

Yeah, a little bit.

**Are you able to be musically creative while at home? Do you play piano and tool around in your private studio?**

I do that mostly in hotel rooms. A hotel room is the closest I get to a private studio.

**Does having the Pacific Ocean in your backyard help you process the Covid-19 pandemic in a spiritual way? There is a theory called "blue mind" which believes that living near water is a health curative.**

Yeah, I can believe that. "Cool Water," "Many Rivers to Cross," "How Deep Is the Ocean." I hear any of those songs and it's like some kind of cure. I don't know what for, but a cure for something that I don't even know I have. A fix of some kind. It's like a spiritual thing. Water is a spiritual thing. I never heard of "blue mind" before. Sounds like it could be some kind of slow blues song. Something Van Morrison would write. Maybe he has, I don't know.

**It's too bad that just when the play "Girl From the North Country," which features your music, was getting rave reviews, production had to shutter because of Covid-19. Have you seen the play or watched the video of it?**

Sure, I've seen it and it affected me. I saw it as an anonymous spectator, not as someone who had anything to do with it. I just let it happen. The play had me crying at the end. I can't even say why. When the curtain came down, I was stunned. I really was. Too bad Broadway shut down because I wanted to see it again.

**Do you think of this pandemic in almost biblical terms? A plague that has swept the land?**

I think it's a forerunner of something else to come. It's an invasion for sure, and it's widespread, but biblical? You mean like some kind of warning sign for people to repent of their wrongdoings? That would imply that the world is in line for some sort of divine punishment. Extreme arrogance can have some disastrous penalties. Maybe we are on the eve of destruction. There are numerous ways you can think about this virus. I think you just have to let it run its course.

**Out of all your compositions, "When I Paint My Masterpiece" has grown on me over the years. What made you bring it back to the forefront of recent concerts?**

It's grown on me as well. I think this song has something to do with the classical world, something that's out of reach. Someplace you'd like to be beyond your experience. Something that is so supreme and first rate that you could never come back down from the mountain. That you've achieved the unthinkable. That's what the song tries to say, and you'd have to put it in that context. In saying that though, even if you do paint your masterpiece, what will you do then? Well, obviously you have to paint another masterpiece. So it could become some kind of never ending cycle, a trap of some kind. The song doesn't say that though.

**A few years ago I saw you play a bluegrass-sounding version of "Summer Days." Have you ever thought about recording a bluegrass album?**

I've never thought about that. Bluegrass music is mysterious and deep rooted and you almost have to be born playing it. Just because you are a great singer, or a great this or that doesn't mean you can be in a bluegrass band. It's almost like classical music. It's harmonic and meditative, but it's out for blood. If you ever heard the Osborne Brothers, then you know what I mean. It's an unforgiving music and you can only it stretch so far. Beatles songs played in a bluegrass style don't make any sense. It's the wrong repertoire, and that's been done. There are elements of bluegrass music for sure in what I play, especially the intensity and similar themes. But I don't have the high tenor voice and we don't have three-part harmony or consistent banjo. I listen to Bill Monroe a lot, but I more or less stick to what I can do best.

**How is your health holding up? You seem to be fit as a fiddle. How do you keep mind and body working together in unison?**

Oh, that's the big question, isn't it? How does anybody do it? Your mind and body go hand in hand. There has to be some kind of agreement. I like to think of the mind as spirit and the body as substance. How you integrate those two things, I have no idea. I just try to go on a straight line and stay on it, stay on the level.

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