Pace University
DigitalCommons@Pace

Honors College Theses | Pforzheimer Honors College

8-1-2006

Bob Dylan and the Sixties: A Social Commentary Reflecting Politics and Existentialism

Nicole Lemieux
Pace University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.pace.edu/honorscollege_theses

 Part of the Musicology Commons

Recommended Citation
Lemieux, Nicole, "Bob Dylan and the Sixties: A Social Commentary Reflecting Politics and Existentialism" (2006). *Honors College Theses*. Paper 39.
http://digitalcommons.pace.edu/honorscollege_theses/39

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Pforzheimer Honors College at DigitalCommons@Pace. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors College Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Pace. For more information, please contact rracelis@pace.edu.

Bob Dylan and the Sixties:

A Social Commentary

Reflecting Politics and Existentialism

Nicole Lemieux

Spring 2006

The 60s were typified by a generation's profound political activism. Issues of race, class, gender, among others each came to the forefront at various points throughout the decade, and acts of protest have come to symbolize the movement's desire for change. While masses of people sought to protest by marching on Washington, some wrote. Through works like James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* and Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*, the struggles that were being so passionately fought by thousands were able to be recorded and preserved for generations that were to come. However, the writer who would come to be most closely associated with the protest and counterculture movements of the 60s was not a novelist or a journalist but a poet. Despite the fact that Dylan's 60s music is primarily political in nature, the truth remains that Dylan was always more of a social commentator. It just happened that his early commentary was on issues that were politically topical at the time, such as civil rights, which subsequently, gave him the unwitting title of protest songwriter extraordinaire and the voice of a generation. As Dylan found this status increasingly undesirable, he sought to shed this image by distancing himself from directly political issues and refocusing his social commentary on more existential themes, exploring the individual's reality and subsistence within society. Regardless of his degree of interest in being a representative of a generation and a movement, Dylan was continually able to capture the cultural and social atmosphere of the 60s, whether it was political or existential, straightforward or obscure.

The trend of writing socially conscious music was first made apparent by Dylan in the early 60s. The social commentary he made on his early albums was often directly linked to political issues that were being taken up by various protesters at the time. In 1962, the Port Huron Statement was released by the Students for a Democratic Society

(SDS). This manifesto for the New Left would serve as an outline for the movement that was to grow over the next several years. The country seemed to be lulled in a dormant state. The introduction of the Port Huron Statement points out that,

> Beneath the reassuring tones of the politicians, beneath the common opinion that America will 'muddle through,' beneath the stagnation of those who have closed their minds to the future, is the pervading feeling that there simply are no alternatives, that our times have witnessed the exhaustion not only of Utopias, but of any new departures as well (coursesa.matrix.msu.edu).

The sense that the general population was becoming complacent, content to simply "muddle through," while being falsely reassured by politicians finally prompted organizations like the SDS and subsequently artists like Dylan to challenge this pervading self-satisfaction. As Mike Marqusee, who has written extensively on Dylan's place in the politics and culture of the 60s, notes, for a change to occur within American society, "Politics itself would have to be redefined" (Marqusee, 63). It was through works like the Port Huron Statement and music like Dylan's *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* that would draw attention to the problems that were present in society, encouraging people to recognize that there was a great deal of apathy regarding politics and that this was strangling the potential for cultural growth.

According to Marqusee, the songs on *Freewheelin'* were inspired by the same social, and incidentally political, issues. Both the album and the manifesto were strident in their attempts to draw public attention to the flaws in the American sociopolitical system. Marqusee points out that *Freewheelin'*s opening song, "Blowin' in the Wind" contained a "mixture of idealism and subdued impatience, as well as its longing for a

bigger answer to the growing questions posed by the events of the day" (63). Furthermore, this philosophy is echoed in the Port Huron Statement, making the racial discrimination along with other political concerns to the cultural forefront. Through Dylan's lyrics in "Blowin' in the Wind," he is able to capture the gravity of racial tension in America, presenting the situation in a manner that is somehow both mournful and admonishing.

> How many roads must a man walk down
> Before you call him a man?
> Yes, 'n' how many seas must a white dove sail
> Before she sleeps in the sand?
> Yes, 'n' how many times must the cannon balls fly
> Before they're forever banned?
> The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind,
> The answer is blowin' in the wind.

The fact that the supposed answer to discrimination and racially motivated violence is "blowin' in the wind," suggests that there is a potential solution, but it isn't necessarily clear and it certainly isn't steadfast. The resolution is fleeting, ephemeral, and in order to reach the goals that groups like the SDS were hoping to achieve, the population must first recognize the injustice and take the initiative to be proactive and seek out the answer which is ever changing and constantly mobile.

Despite the apparent direct correlation between "Blowin' in the Wind" and the burgeoning civil rights movement, Dylan was quick to argue that the song was not inherently a political statement. This would go on to be his stance for much of his music throughout the 60s; there was always an insistence that the songs weren't inherently

political, rather socially inspired songs which could be related to political issues. In an issue of *Broadside*, a magazine publication devoted to folk music, Dylan said of the "Blowin' in the Wind," "This here ain't a protest song or anything like that, 'cause I don't write protest songs." He would go on to say "I'm just writing it as something to be said, for somebody, by somebody" (Heylin, 93). As much as that statement may be true, the fact remains that the something this particular somebody was saying was immediately associated with the race problems that were so prevalent in America in the 60s. "Blowin' in the Wind," due in part to the cover version by Peter, Paul, and Mary would become an anthem of the civil rights movement. The song was performed at the March on Washington, fully solidifying its place as a representative of the political ideals of a generation.

For the first time the blame for racism was being placed not only on those who commit acts of violence, but also on the general population who was turning a blind eye to the oppression that was becoming increasingly more prevalent. Although Dylan insisted that the song wasn't an act of protest, lines like "Yes, 'n' how many times can a man turn his head,/Pretending he just doesn't see?" directly questioned those who refused to directly engage in the protest movement. David Hajdu writes that "For all its obtuseness,…the song makes a sweeping indictment: When evils exist, and they always do, everyone but the protester is to blame. Who could dare not join in that chorus?" (Hajdu, 117). The notion of not simply placing blame on the seemingly obvious perpetrator would prove to be a common them throughout much of Dylan's protest music. From "Only a Pawn in their Game" to "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," which both appeared on Dylan's next album *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, the public at large would find themselves grappling with the question of how sizable their share of

the blame was. While it is easy to blame the specific individuals who commit acts of violence, and even government leaders for allowing such actions to occur, very few are willing to own their part of the blame for being apathetic towards injustice. However, according to the sentiment in songs like "Blowin' in the Wind," by ignoring the problem and not taking a stand in protest, one is equally guilty in contributing to the further growth of discrimination.

Another *Freewheelin'* song, "Masters of War," however, took on a much more pointedly incriminating stance on the government and the establishment whose corrupt policies were wreaking havoc on the world at large. Marqusee explores the sentiment behind "Masters of War," explaining that it is a song that grapples "not merely with the imminence of way, but with its deeper causes, with the forces that promote and profit from fear and violence" (Marqusee, 74). Dylan scathingly addresses those in power and the abuses they commit in the following verse:

> You that never done nothin'
> But build to destroy
> You play with my world
> Like it's your little toy
> You put a gun in my hand
> And you hide from my eyes
> And you turn and run farther
> When the fast bullets fly.

According to Dylan's assessment, those with political power are quick to seek out war; however, the epitome of this corruption lies in the fact that the poor who are blindly following the establishment are the ones who are sent out to fight, while the powerful

elite are able to live comfortably and safely away from the front lines. Those in command are never forced to directly engage in the conflicts that they cause, instead they "fasten the triggers/ For the others to fire." Since these political leaders "hide in [their] mansion[s]/As young people's blood/Flows out of their bodies/And is buried in the mud," they are rarely concerned with the suffering and death that is caused, so long as the result of the mission is lucrative or somehow serves to benefit the elite.

Dylan however uses "Masters of War" to essentially call out the politicians who cause death and destruction for the damage they have caused. "Dylan points the finger of guilt at the war-makers and war-profiteers and jabs it in their faces," Marqusee notes. He continues, noting "The song is dry, sparse, and unwavering in its indictment and its anger" (Marqusee, 75). Dylan's voice and tone throughout the song is contemptuous, and the rhythm of the song is unyielding. Loudon Waiwright III comments on the impact made by "Masters of War," saying "He attacks the biggest targets going, and there's nothing polite about it. It's a young man's rage—outrage really—not Where Have All the Flowers Gone? There's no choruses, and the guitar playing is…it's unrelenting" (Blake, 261). By the end of the song, as Dylan sings the following verse, the challenge he poses to the establishment is direct and biting:

Let me ask you one question
Is your money that good
Will it buy you forgiveness
Do you think that it could
I think you will find
When your death takes its toll

All the money you made

Will never buy back your soul

The public's sense of apathy that was addressed in "Blowin' in the Wind" must be thrown out and overcome. Dylan's lyrics in this song ring out as an adamant declaration that people are no longer going to passively sit by and allow themselves to be the ones who are firing the triggers blindly for the war-mongers who are in charge. The speaker in the lines "You might say that I'm young/You might say I'm unlearned," represented the segment of the population that would rise up in the 60s and join the marches on Washington and the Pentagon. Although these individuals may have been brushed off by political big-wigs as young and idealistic, they would go on to prove that they were impassioned and willing to fight for change. Despite the seemingly ardent tone of the song, however, in typical Dylan fashion, the song's political stance was downplayed by the songwriter. Regardless of the fact that he irreverently claimed to have written the song for the money, as political songs were growing in popularity, it is impossible to convincingly downplay the vociferous message of the song.

Another Freewheelin' song, "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," breached a new territory in Dylan's topical songwriting. Like many of the songs that would be released in the coming years, "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" took on a more poetic, surrealist approach. The complexity of the song has been described as a work that "encapsulated the magic and mystery of a five-hundred-year-old ballad, the deep dark truths of Dante, and the apocalyptic symbolism of the French poets and the beats into six and a half minutes of sheer terror" (Heylin, 102). The song is relentless in its imagery of the chaotic aftermath of an apocalyptic scale disaster. Many, including Dylan himself, have attributed the song's inspiration to the Cuban missile crisis; however, the dates suggest

otherwise, as the song was premiered prior to the missiles being discovered (Marqusee, 65).

Regardless of whether or not the dates coincide, the content of "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" can clearly be associated with the public's sense of apprehension about what the future would hold in a world under threat of nuclear fallout. The lyrics depict a sense of poetic foreboding, describing myriad instances where the bleak aftermath of terror and turmoil is observed:

> I saw a newborn baby with wild wolves all around it
> I saw a highway of diamonds with nobody on it,
> I saw a black branch with blood that kept drippin',
> I saw a room full of men with their hammers a-bleedin',
> I saw a white ladder all covered with water,
> I saw ten thousand talkers whose tongues were all broken,
> I saw guns and sharp swords in the hands of young children,
> And it's a hard, and it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard,
> And it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall.

The repetitive nature of the lines in "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" give the song and the situation which is being described in it an overwhelming sense of a loss of control. Mayhem is saturating the landscape, and everyone and everything is directly affected. The blue-eyed boy who is recounting what he has seen describes human suffering ("I met a young woman whose body was burning"), natural disaster ("I've been out in front of a dozen dead oceans"), as well as a general sense of impending catastrophic events ("Where the home in the valley meets the damp dirty prison"). These atrocities are hammered out, line after line, verse after verse, and it all comes together to form a unified

warning of the danger that is to come should the current political state continue to spiral out of control, whether that be as a result of the Cuban missile crisis, or a more general form of warlike devastation.

Following the release of *Freewheelin'*, Dylan joined a list of performers which included Joan Baez, Peter, Paul and Mary, and Odetta to perform at the March on Washington. On August 28, 1963, Dylan would further solidify his image as the political voice of a generation by appearing at the March. Dylan performed "Blowin' in the Wind," "Only a Pawn in Their Game," from his as yet unreleased next album *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, a traditional spiritual called "Hold On," and "We Shall Overcome" with Baez (Hajdu, 182). The crowd of more than 200,000 demonstrators was comprised of primarily black Southerners, though thousands of white, mostly intellectuals, joined in the protest (Marqusee, 7). The March would in many ways be the spark that motivated those who were being oppressed as well as those who were outraged by such injustice to finally step forward and take action. "Suddenly," Marqusee writes, "the spirit of the mass meetings that had inspired and coordinated the wave of direct action against American apartheid in hundreds of southern towns was being carried to the streets to the nation's capital and broadcast on network television" (Marqusee, 7-8). In the years to come, this historic event held on the mall in front of the Lincoln memorial, was to become an icon of the civil rights movement, typified by Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream Speech."

The March on Washington would prove to be one of the few instances where Dylan would make a public show of support for a politically driven cause. One of the few other appearances was in Mississippi, where black voters were being registered to vote by members of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (Santelli, 30). Despite his

general support of the causes he wrote about, Dylan had very little desire to serve as the musical representative of the movement. In many ways, he felt uneasy standing as a public representative of a movement and a people that he wasn't necessarily intimately knowledgeable of. David Hajdu points out that Dylan "felt especially uncomfortable as a white man in the civil rights movement; he could never understand the black experience…and his own sympathies extended beyond race" (Hajdu, 201). He goes on to quote Dylan as saying "'I've got nothing against Negro rights. I never did. [But] anybody who is taught to get his kicks off a superiority feeling—man, that's a drag'" (Hajdu, 202). Dylan's sentiments about the position of a white man as a representative of the civil rights movement was very much echoed by Dick Gregory who criticized the central role that several of the white performers took at the March on Washington:

> What was a white boy like Bob Dylan there for?...To support the cause? Wonderful—support the cause. March. Stand behind us—but not in front of us. If Bob Dylan and Joan Baez and whoever the hell stood out there with the crowd and cheered for Odetta and Josh White, that would be a greater statement than arriving in their limousines and taking bows" (Hajdu, 183).

There was a definite sense of conflict among those involved in the civil rights movement. Although artists like Baez were continually urging Dylan to maintain a recognizable presence in support of the cause, Dylan began to reject this persona more adamantly. Dylan would quickly begin to distance himself from the movement and his unwitting stance as the public mouthpiece of a generation; however, his next album would once again take on social issues and would contain a series of topical, finger-pointing songs.

The Times They Are A-Changin' featured several songs of social commentary that could be regarded as politically motivated songs. For the second album in a row, Dylan opened with a track that would come to be heralded as a representation of the 60s counterculture and protest movements. The song, in effect, rallied the American youth, inspiring protesters of the civil rights movement, women's liberation, and various other organizations. The song's message was easily adaptable to multiple different movements; the call to speak up and encourage change was universal to demonstrators from all walks of life. Dylan himself describes it as "a song with a purpose. I knew exactly what I wanted to say and for whom I wanted to say it to…I wanted to write a big song, some kind of theme song, ya know, with short concise verses that piled up on each other in a hypnotic way" (Marqusee, 90). Although it is often difficult to gauge the sincerity of Dylan's comments about his songs, the importance he places on them and the inspiration he used for the songs, these comments ring fairly true to the trajectory the song would end up taking.

The short concise verses that Dylan piled up were crafted in such a way that it is difficult for the listener not to feel compelled to action upon hearing it. The following verse is merely one example of how the song calls out for engagement:

> Come senators, congressmen
> Please heed the call
> Don't stand in the doorway
> Don't block up the hall
> For he that gets hurt
> Will be he who has stalled
> There's a battle outside

And it is ragin'.

It'll soon shake your windows

And rattle your walls

For the times they are a-changin' ("The Times They Are A-Changin'"). Everyone from the youth in America, to their parents who question their children's actions, to the congressmen who are in charge of the political climate of the country is somehow drawn into the fray. The song is meant to represent the gathering of each of these groups' attention, and if the lyrics are successful, they will inspire action rather than passivity. The critics will take up their pens and force the senators into action as well, in a course that will move them from their position blocking the hall, which could represent a more all encompassing sense of progress.

There are points in "The Times They Are A-Changin'" where Dylan's lyrics evoke the sentiments expressed by James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time*, which was released around the same time. Both warn of the destruction that is impending, while encouraging their audiences to prevent it by being proactive. Baldwin writes, "If we…do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world" (Baldwin, 105). Dylan's lyrics, "If your time to you/Is worth savin'/Then you better start swimmin'/Or you'll sink like a stone/For the times they are a-changin'" express the same demand that in order to maintain a harmonious quality in the world, one must step up before it is too late. Both works also contain Biblical allusions in order to get the point across. It has been argued that in "The Times They Are A-Changin'" Dylan "issues a prophetic warning against complacency" (Marqusee, 91). Dylan notes that the writers are able to "prophesize with [their] pen," and the continuous imagery of sinking harkens back the

religious aspect of the song. Similarly, Baldwin warns that "if we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophesy, re-created from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!" (Baldwin, 106). Both writers are able to take a political issue, call for the public's attention and involvement in the movement for change, and warn of approaching doom in Biblical terms.

The Times They Are A-Changin' also features a series of Dylan's topical, or finger-pointing, songs. These songs harkened back to a folk tradition of taking a specific societal occurrence and creating a song around the facts of the incident. Dylan describes the conceit of the topical song, noting, "Songs about real events were always topical. You could usually find some kind of point of view in it, though, and take it for what it was worth, and the writer doesn't have to be accurate, could tell you anything and you're going to believe it" (*Chronicles*, 82). In this vein, Dylan is very much continuing with his trend of writing socially driven songs which happened to be related to issues that were at the political forefront of the time. "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" was one of the topical songs, inspired by true events, which appears on *The Times They Are A-Changin'*. Jordy Rocheleau explores the song's political relevance from a philosophical point of view. Rocheleau argues that "Dylan's protest music, which led to his being embraced as revolutionary spokesperson, exhibits Enlightenment social philosophy, while his work since this period provides an introduction to the political insights and ambiguities of postmodernism" (Rocheleau, 66). Dylan's topical songs key into Enlightenment philosophy in that in order for society to grow and progress, there must be freedom and morality for all are essential for a harmonious culture (Rocheleau, 67). By presenting situations like the case of Hattie Carroll, where society fails to bring justice to

the victim, Dylan comments on the failure to maintain Enlightenment philosophies regarding freedom.

Hattie Carroll was a poor black servant. Her life, her work, and her struggle are described in the following verse:

> Hattie Carroll was a maid of the kitchen.
> She was fifty-one years old and gave birth to ten children
> Who carried the dishes and took out the garbage
> And never sat once at the head of the table
> And didn't even talk to the people at the table
> Who just cleaned up all the food from the table.

Carroll was killed by a wealthy white man named William Zanzinger. Zanzinger struck Carroll on the head with his cane and she would die from her injuries shortly afterwards. He is depicted by Dylan as cold and heartless, a man who "Reacted to his deed with a shrug of his shoulders." Zanzinger would later be put on trial and acquitted. Dylan took the facts of this incident and created a song which condemned a variety of issues which were involved in the case: racial discrimination, class problems, and the ways these concerns are dealt with in court. The lack of justice is the aspect of this case which enrages Dylan the most, as Rocheleau points out, because this is the point in the song where Dylan sings "Oh, but you who philosophize disgrace and criticize all fears,/Bury the rag deep in your face/For now's the time for your tears." As horrible as it was for Carroll to have been relegated to the life of a maid working for members of the wealthy elite, and has tragic as it was that she was killed in the manner that she was, the true travesty lies in the court's failure to bring justice to her case. Each verse of the song ends saying, "now ain't the time for your tears," though the time for true outrage lies in the

court's acquittal of Zanzinger. This serves as a more all encompassing example of the extreme degree of discrimination that was prevalent in America in the 60s. While it is horrible for an individual to strike and subsequently kill another person, the fact that he is not brought to justice, that the courts essentially condone such action, is abhorrent according to Dylan.

Another topical song that appears on *The Times They Are A-Changin'* is "Only a Pawn in Their Game," which addresses the murder of Medgar Evers, who served as an organizer for the NAACP. Like "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," Dylan takes this incident and demonstrates how this singular murder is a representative of a larger, more insidious problem. In his essay "Who Killed Medgar Evers?" Avery Kolers explains that Dylan's intent in "Pawn in Their Game" is to illuminate the fact that the true perpetrator in a crime such as the murder of Medgar Evers is not the individual who pulled the trigger, but rather the establishment which cultivates and encourages such a killer. People like Evers' murderer, Byron de la Beckwith, are cannot easily be written off as cold-blooded murderers. In fact, they are, as the title of the song suggests, simply pawns used by the leadership of the nation. "Being 'pawns,'" Kolers writes, "they're incapable of moral choice—not the authors of their actions, but mere tools of others' agendas" (Kolers, 29). While it may be a bit questionable not to put any significant responsibility in the hands of de la Beckwith, the fact that Dylan points the finger of blame on the larger realm of societal leaders is apt.

Dylan claims that the blame lies with the politicians, judges, sheriffs, and governors who serve as leaders of the nation and directors who have a profound influence on the values of the nation. Pete Seeger says of "Only a Pawn in Their Game," "The song says just putting the murderer in jail wasn't enough. It was about ending the whole game

of segregation" (Blake, 255). When the white men are continually taught "'You got more than the blacks, don't complain./You're better than them, you been born with white skin'" it can be argued that the majority of the blame is placed on the politicians and national leaders who encourage this line of thinking, rather than solely the individuals who act with this mentality as a driving force. He continues with this sentiment by adding " the poor white man's used in the hands of them all like a tool./He's taught in his school/From the start by the rule/That the laws are with him/To protect his white skin." James Baldwin closely echoes this belief that Dylan would claim was instilled in de la Beckwith. There is a conception that the white population are so susceptible to act in violence towards blacks because they have been taught that they are somehow superior and that the black population might threaten this advantageous societal position. Speaking of the white's preoccupation with maintaining this fabricated sense of value, Baldwin writes:

> …there is certainly little enough in the white man's public or private life that one should desire to imitate. White men, at the bottom of their hearts, know this. Therefore, a vast amount of the energy that goes into what we call the Negro problem is produced by the white man's profound desire not to be judged by those who are not white, not to be seen as he is, and at the same time a vast amount of the white anguish is rooted in the white man's equally profound need to be seen as he is, to be released from the tyranny of his mirror (Baldwin, 95).

While Baldwin doesn't specifically point to political and governmental leaders as the ones who instilled this mentality into the general population, he does imply that there can be serious repercussions if whites continually project their own issues and insecurities on blacks. As literature like *The Fire Next Time* and "Only a Pawn in Their Game" became

more perceptible to the American population, the more outraged many became by this particular downside of American society, and the more drive there was to advance the civil rights movement.

In conjunction with "Blowin' in the Wind" and "The Times They Are A-Changin'," Dylan's topical songs, like "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" and "Only a Pawn in Their Game" would solidify his public image as the protest songwriter of politically and socially driven 60s. The more he was drawn into the movement, the more he resisted it. Dylan began to resent the status he had been unwittingly given as a songwriter and the profound importance that was being placed on his songs. "Topical songs weren't protest songs," Dylan argues, continuing to explain:

> The term "protest singer" didn't exist any more than the term "singer-songwriter."…"Songs of dissent" was a term people used but even that was rare. I tried to explain later that I didn't think I was a protest singer, that there'd been a screwup. I didn't think I was protesting anything any more than I thought that Woody Guthrie songs were protesting anything. I didn't think of Woody as a protest singer" (Chronicles, 82-3).

To Dylan, he was simply following folk traditions in his topical songs and commenting on general societal occurrences, claiming "I don't think when I write. I just react and put it down on paper" (Heylin, 127). The fact that he was being heralded as a profoundly earnest proponent of politically driven issues, while he felt he was merely translating what he was witnessing into song, became frustrating for Dylan. Subsequently, this frustration would be reflected in thematic change his next album would take.

Upon being trumpeted as the mouthpiece of the 60s generation and the protest movement, Dylan actively distanced himself further from this position by abandoning

writing music that would typically be seen as standard protest music. For the most part, Dylan's next album, *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, would feature a collection of self-reflexive and non-politically driven songs. In an interview for *The New Yorker*, Dylan explained "'There aren't any finger-pointing songs in here'…'Me, I don't want to write *for* people any more—you know, a spokesman. From now on, I want to write from inside me, and to do that I'm going to have to get back to writing like I used to when I was ten—having everything come out naturally'" (Hajdu, 203). On *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, songs like "It Ain't Me Babe," "Ballad in Plain D," and "All I Really Want to Do" explored themes of love and youthful confusion, a stark departure from "Only a Pawn in Their Game" and "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll."

The only track that could ostensibly be considered a protest song on Another Side of Bob Dylan was "Chimes of Freedom." The song was composed on a trip to California in 1964, where Dylan played at the University of California at Berkeley. Berkeley would become the epicenter for the Free Speech Movement in the months to come, making it a symbolic landmark in the politics of the 60s (Marqusee, 99). "Chimes of Freedom" serves as a transitional song in the scope of protest music. While not as oblique as the songs to come on *Highway 61 Revisited*, the song was also not a seemingly straightforward topical or finger-pointing song either. The song has been described as the result of "a social epiphany," that Dylan realized while waiting for a thunderstorm to pass. In the song, as the church bells toll, "sight and sound collide," and the result is this moment or realization, "in which a vast cast of the dispossessed and oppressed appear and are embraced" (Marqusee, 99). Like "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," there is a degree of apocalyptic imagery in "Chimes of Freedom," particularly revealed by the force and power of nature. There is "blowin' rain," "wild ripping hail," and "hypnotic splattered

mist." Marqusee points out that while "Chimes of Freedom" is alluding to the same large scale social injustices that were tackled in his topical songs, the difference here lies in the fact that rather than simply focusing the blame on political and social leaders, here Dylan hones in on the way that the "system's victims, those it persecutes and those it ignores and discards" are affected (Marqusee, 100). In "Chimes of Freedom," Dylan is touching upon the broader social chaos and insanity that he will more fully explore on *Highway 61 Revisited* in songs like "Desolation Row" and the album's title track.

Dylan's next album, *Bringing it All Back Home*, would further the evolution from the public projection of straightforward topical songwriter to a more veiled social commentator. The most notable contribution to this advanced transformation was Dylan's first serious move to go electric. Half of *Bringing it All Back Home* would be recorded as an electric album, which further distanced Dylan from his traditional folk roots. The movement would outrage folk purists who felt Dylan had sold out and abandoned his position as the musical representation of 60s politics, the status he'd been eagerly trying to shed. The opening track "Subterranean Homesick Blues," which opened D.A. Pennebaker's widely acclaimed documentary *Don't Look Back*, is a barrage of words that are spat out in a frantic bombardment of rhymes and rhythm. In the song, rather than protesting matters that were being hotly debated and fought for at the time, like civil rights and free speech, Dylan turned his social commentary to issues of blind social conformity as is seen in the lyrics "Ah get born, keep warm/Short pants, romance, learn to dance/Get dressed, get blessed/Try to be a success" (Marqusee, 174). Though the song isn't an overtly political song, it does suggest that the compliance with social order that causes the perpetuation of countless other social inequities and injustices. "Subterranean Homesick Blues" would prove to have at least one other noticeable political tie in that the

Weathermen, a radical counterculture group that had broken away from the SDS, took their name from the song's lyric "You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows" (Marqusee, 278-9).

Dylan continued to branch out in his social commentary on *Bringing it All Back Home* on "It's All Right Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)." The song, which clocks in at over seven minutes in length tackles myriad issues that can be seen as a threat to American society, most notably the nation's obsession with commerce and material possessions. As was the case with "Subterranean Homesick Blues" and as would be the case with the songs on *Highway 61 Revisited*, Dylan was keen on calling out some of the less easily recognized issues that plagued the country. This new style of song writing, poetic and profound lyrics which stretched the traditional formula of a pop song, allowed Dylan to express himself in a manner which had never been previously attempted.

> Before "It's Alright Ma," popular song was not a medium for critiquing society, only for isolating specific injustices. Dylan had irrevocably advanced beyond this position, aware that he had no choice but to live his life (and his life only) amongst the pragmatic agnostics, stumbling blindly around the perimeters of Eden (Heylin, 170).

In a time where activists were protesting for civil rights, Dylan was able to see beyond what was admittedly an inexcusable injustice, and sought to illuminate some of the broader social problems which may have been fueling the continued discrimination.

Many aspects of "It's Alright Ma" directly relate to the philosophy Herbert Marcuse expresses in "An Essay on Liberation." Marcuse mixes Marxist and Freudian theory in an effort to expound upon contemporary society's obsession with capitalism. Marqusee points out that Dylan's message, whether intentional or not, in "It's Alright

Ma" is that "at the heart of this society is what Marx (certainly not Dylan) called the commodity fetish—and its ideological handmaiden in mass society, the advertising industry," which can be blamed for promulgating the notion "That you can do what's never been done/That you can win what's never been won" (Marqusee, 128). Marcuse echoes this philosophy by claiming: "In the advanced capitalist countries, the radicalization of the working classes is counteracted by a socially engineered arrest of consciousness, and by the development and satisfaction of needs which perpetuate the servitude of the exploited" (Marcuse, 16). The more instances of consumers scrambling for "To flesh-colored Christs that glow in the dark," the more apparent it is, as Dylan writes "That not much/Is really sacred." To be at the mercy of possessions and capitalism, Dylan implies, is profoundly dangerous, because it is so insidious. "A question in your nerves is lit/Yet you know there is no answer fit to satisfy/Insure you not to quit/To keep it in your mind and not fergit/That it is not he or she or them or it/That you belong to" suggests that one cannot forget that he or she is not owned by anyone or anything else. One cannot lose sight of this fact, or there is a great possibility of falling into the trap of complacent, blind following.

Dylan's next album, *Highway 61 Revisited*, would be his most ambitious venture to date. The electric album features songs that were not only unique and revolutionary from a musical standpoint, but Dylan was able to breach new territory in the art of songwriting through is socially conscious lyrics. The style of writing that was being explored in songs like "Chimes of Freedom" and "It's Alright Ma" were fully expressed on this album. On this album, Dylan found himself branching further away from directly political lyrics and shifting the focus to more existential issues and philosophies.

> The language of these songs sometimes achieves an intoxicated richness. Their electric vocabulary and range of reference were (and remain) exceptional in what was considered a medium for the unsophisticated…The language is highly idiosyncratic, but entirely up-to-date. The songs are sprinkled with arresting images, epithets, verbal paradoxes (Marqusee, 140).

Through songs like "Like a Rolling Stone," "Highway 61 Revisited," and "Desolation Row," Dylan further explores the ideas of social instability, chaos, and lunacy that was initially described in "It's Alright Ma." Although these songs are considerably more surrealistic and less blatant in their political nature, there is undoubtedly still a significant social commentary being made throughout the course of the album.

"Like a Rolling Stone" addresses establishing a new perspective on liberation. Following a wealthy young woman who has been deserted "without a home/Like a complete unknown," the song takes a situation which may initially have been viewed as negative and frightening and turns the woman's abandonment into a chance for freedom. Once again, Dylan criticizes compulsive materialism and the uselessness of formal institutions like university:

> You've gone to the finest school all right, Miss Lonely
> But you know you only used to get juiced in it
> And nobody has ever taught you how to live on the street
> And now you find out you're gonna have to get used to it.

These lines challenge the life that this young woman had been living, pointing out that her education had been futile, as she had been left utterly unprepared to deal with an

unpampered life. Similarly, the people that she would consort with are revealed as being corrupt and manipulative:

> You never turned around to see the frowns on the jugglers and the clowns
> When they all come down and did tricks for you
> You never understood that it ain't no good
> You shouldn't let other people get your kicks for you
> You used to ride on the chrome horse with your diplomat
> Who carried on his shoulder a Siamese cat
> Ain't it hard when you discover that
> He really wasn't where it's at
> After he took from you everything he could steal.

Not only was she taken advantage of by her "diplomat," but she would continually use those around her for her own entertainment. Like Baldwin's call to the white population to recognize and subsequently shed their false sense superiority, Dylan's narrator serves as an uncompromisingly honest reality-check for the woman in the song. Although the speaker seems vicious at times, the ultimate point is that this woman and society in general, needs to overcome their existential crises and recognize the transitory nature of material possessions. When Dylan sings, "When you got nothing, you got nothing to lose/You're invisible now, you got no secrets to conceal" he is essentially saying that this situation is not the woman's destruction but her salvation. If she is able to find a new sensibility, "which expresses the ascent of the life instincts over aggressiveness and guilt, would foster, on a social scale, the vital need for the abolition of injustice and misery and would shape the future of the 'standard of living'" (Marcuse, 23-24). If this woman is

able to embrace the life instincts and create Marcuse's new sensibility, she will truly be liberated.

"Highway 61 Revisited" further illustrates the chaos that Dylan projects for the future in an American society where violence and careless acts in favor of personal gain are prevalent. Rocheleau contends that "incomprehensibility may be the dominant theme of Dylan's post-protest period," adding that "the individual becomes lost in a baffling society and suffers seemingly meaningless violence" (Rocheleau, 71). In the final verse, Dylan captures a society which has run completely rampant, where capitalism reigns supreme and violence is sold as a viable commodity:

> Now the rovin' gambler he was very bored
> He was tryin' to create a next world war
> He found a promoter who nearly fell off the floor
> He said I never engaged in this kind of thing before
> But yes I think it can be very easily done
> We'll just put some bleachers out in the sun
> And have it on Highway 61.

Norman Mailer expresses a similar sentiment in Armies of the Night, regarding the fate of America and the sheer incomprehensibility of society and its values. Mailer writes that "he had come to decide that the center of America might be insane. The country had been living with a controlled, even fiercely controlled, schizophrenia which had been deepening with the years" (Mailer, 188). Both Dylan and Mailer's comments suggest that there is a crisis in the general psychology of America's citizens. Moreover, until there is a solid foundation to build upon, problems like war, racism, and other such troubles will continue to thrive.

In “Desolation Row,” Dylan further explores the incomprehensibility and chaos that is present throughout the album. In this epic song, Dylan presents a series of characters from history and literature, and in a surrealist style borrowed from the Beats. “Desolation Row” is described as “an eleven-minute Kafkaesque world of gypsies, hoboes, thieves of fire, and historical characters beyond their rightful time” (Heylin, 219). Throughout the song, Dylan weaves a series of images together in such a way that it is not only revealed how difficult and outlandish life can be, but these facts are embraced rather than scorned. Dylan creates a world, Desolation Row, which one would assume is a sad and undesirable place, and instead insists that this is the desirable locale. In the case of Ophelia, it is revealed that “Her sin is her lifelessness.” She is a young woman who never truly lived, rather “On her twenty-second birthday/She already is an old maid.” She is presented as a tragic figure, and she “She spends her time peeking/Into Desolation Row,” rather than trying to run away from it. The following verse reveals that Desolation Row is a place to be visited by only by those who have truly lived.

All these people that you mention
Yes, I know them, they're quite lame
I had to rearrange their faces
And give them all another name
Right now I can't read too good
Don't send me no more letters no
Not unless you mail them
From Desolation Row

The speaker doesn’t have much regard for those who have not been to Desolation Row. Rather than being unrealistically optimistic, Dylan acknowledges that life is hard, but one

can't merely remain secluded and sealed away. Instead, one must live life, face the challenges, and only those who do are worthy of careful consideration.

Throughout the 60s, Bob Dylan created a varied catalogue of songs which served as a social commentary on American culture through a varied array manners, be it political in nature or more existential. There were the anthemic songs like "Blowin' in the Wind" and "The Times They Are A-Changin'" which were heartily adopted by various movements and organizations throughout the decade. It was these songs that played a key role in dubbing Dylan the voice of a generation. His topical, or finger-pointing, songs like "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" and "Only a Pawn in Their Game" only heightened this status. As Dylan grew increasingly uncomfortable serving as a representative of the movement, he continually sought to distance himself from it both in the lyrical content of his songs, and the musical style in which they were composed and presented. Transitional songs like "Chimes of Freedom" and "It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" opened the door, stylistically, for the songs that would appear on *Highway 61 Revisited*. Dylan proposed that he had abandoned the political drive which had been attributed to his earlier albums in favor of songs that explored more surrealistic imagery. Despite the fact that many would argue that these songs were a great departure, in reality they were merely exploring a different form of social commentary. Songs such as "Highway 61 Revisited" and "Desolation Row" are every bit as socially conscious as his overt topical songs, albeit in a more existential way. Regardless of the fact that he wasn't addressing specific social injustices like racial discrimination at this point in his career, Dylan was still an adroit social commentator. Moreover, the issues that Dylan presents on *Highway 61 Revisited*, such as a rejection of capitalist drives and a quest to establish a new sensibility are quintessential political and philosophical questions that were grappled

with throughout the 60s. While these topics were addressed by numerous other writers, none were able to present their claims in a manner nearly as uniquely, skillfully, or profoundly as Bob Dylan.

Works Cited

Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. New York: Vintage, 1993.

Blake, Mark, ed. *Dylan: Visions, Portraits & Back Pages*. London: DK, 2005.

Bob Dylan-songs. 15 May, 2006. <http://bobdylan.com/songs/>

Don't Look Back. Dir. D.A. Pennebaker. Docurama, 1967.

Dylan, Bob. *Another Side of Bob Dylan*. Columbia Records: 1964.

---. *Bob Dylan*. Columbia Records: 1962.

---. Bringing it All Back Home. Columbia Records: 1965.

---. *Blonde on Blonde*. Columbia Records: 1966.

---. *Chronicles: Volume One*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004.

---. *Highway 61 Revisited*. Columbia Records: 1965.

---. *Lyrics, 1962-198.* New York: Knopf, 1985.

---. *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*. Columbia Records: 1963.

---. *The Times They Are A-Changin'*. Columbia Records: 1964.

Hajdu, David. *Positively 4th Street*. New York: North Point Press, 2001.

Hedin, Benjamin, ed. *Studio A: The Bob Dylan Reader*. New York: Norton, 2004.

Heylin, Clinton. *Behind the Shades Revisited*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.

Kolers, Avery. "Who Killed Medgar Evers?" *Bob Dylan and Philosophy: It's Alright Ma, (I'm Only Thinking)*. Ed. Peter Vernezze and Carl J. Porter. Chicago: Open Court, 2006.

Mailer, Norman. *The Armies of the Night*. New York: Plume, 1994.

Marcuse, Herbert. *An Essay on Liberation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.

Marqusee, Mike. Wicked Messenger: Bob Dylan and the 1960s. New York:

Seven Stories Press, 2003.

No Direction Home: Bob Dylan. Dir. Martin Scorsese. Paramount, 2005.

Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society, 1962. Courtesy Office of Sen. Tom Hayden. 10 May, 2006. <http://coursesa.matrix.msu.edu/~hst306/documents/huron.html>

Rocheleau, Jordy. "Far Between Sundown's Finish An' Midnight's Broken Toll": Enlightenment and Postmodernism in Dylan's Social Criticism." *Bob Dylan and Philosophy: It's Alright Ma, (I'm Only Thinking)*. Ed. Peter Vernezze and Carl J. Porter. Chicago: Open Court, 2006.

Santelli, Robert. *The Bob Dylan Scrapbook, 1956-1966*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005.