

Getting There

Keith Frankish

'I love you, Bob!' a voice behind me yelled as Bob Dylan walked on stage in Sheffield in 1998. It was a deep male voice with a strong South Yorkshire accent. Not the sort of voice you might expect to express emotion easily, but it was professing love, and there was a sob in it. I knew how the speaker felt. We feel that we know Bob Dylan, that we love him. After all, he often sings in the first person — about himself, his loves, his anger, his heart-break, his despair. And we feel that he knows us, too. He's been through tough times, like us; he knows what it's like and he expresses it with an intensity and beauty that transforms the pain and makes it seem all right.

Of course, few of us know Bob Dylan the man — the musician and songwriter born in Duluth in 1941 and now in his eightieth year. Dylan is a creative artist who uses the first person as a dramatic device and expresses himself through a variety of personas. But it's just this that forges the tight connection to our hearts. Dylan draws on a vast range of sources, musical and literary, which he refines and transmutes into songs that are both distinctively his and deeply rooted in tradition. When he sings, he is channeling a thousand other voices who have sung before. Like Walt Whitman, he contains multitudes, and it's his multitudinousness that enables him to speak to us so intimately. We can each find a Dylan who speaks to us — our reflection in the man's multifaceted brilliance.

Dylan also keeps renewing himself artistically. As he exhausts the potential of one persona, he goes back to his sources, returning with new materials, new techniques, and new voices. And so, unlike many other popular musicians, he has been able to remain creatively active throughout his life, singing songs of midlife and old age that are as moving and potent as those of his youth. Nothing better illustrates this than the way he has sung about mortality. Here's how it goes. Or rather, here's how it goes with *my* Dylan, the one that speaks directly to me.

Death has always been a presence in Dylan's work. On his debut album the twenty-year-old Dylan was singing about fixing to die and raucously pleading that his grave be kept clean — asserting his place in a folk tradition occupied with the bitter realities of life. But the young Dylan sings of death with a detachment that only a youth could maintain. Death is often terrible and cruel, but it doesn't touch him personally:

There's seven people dead on a South Dakota farm,
There's seven people dead on a South Dakota farm,
Somewhere in the distance there's seven new people born.
— 'Ballad of Hollis Brown'

Even when he sings of his own death, it is as one who sets the terms and is in control of the situation:

I will not go down under the ground
'Cause somebody tells me that death's comin' 'round
An' I will not carry myself down to die
When I go to my grave my head will be high.
— 'Let Me Die in My Footsteps'

He will meet death actively, like an outlaw taking one more cup of coffee before setting out to meet his fate or a wounded sheriff knocking on heaven's door:

It's gettin' dark, too dark for me to see
I feel like I'm knockin' on heaven's door
— 'Knockin' On Heaven's Door'

In Dylan's Christian period, death assumes a different guise. It won't do to bemoan it or fight it; we must answer the question it poses:

Are you ready to meet Jesus?
Are you where you ought to be?
Will He know you when He sees you
Or will He say, "Depart from Me"?

Are you ready, hope you're ready
Am I ready, am I ready?
Am I ready, am I ready?
— 'Are You Ready'

But though the question is peremptory, it's not frightening. The gospel-infused songs of this period burst with energy and conviction. Dylan is surfing a wave of faith, and nothing can stop him, not even death. He's still in control. The mood dissipates in the following years, but enough of it survives to produce the serene and uplifting 'Death is Not the End', from the 1988 album *Down in the Groove*.

Then, in the nineties, things change. At a creative dead end and with his voice failing, Dylan went back to his roots to renew himself, producing two albums of spare, increasingly dark folk covers. The reinvention culminated

in 1997's *Time Out of Mind*, where he debuted a new persona, the shipwrecked midlifer battered by love and loss, and a new voice, broken, vulnerable, painfully expressive, and perfectly suited to darker, less secure themes. In this persona he sang about death very differently, expressing the cruel change of perspective that age brings. In 'Trying to Get to Heaven', he's no longer a hero knocking dramatically on heaven's door, but a sick and disillusioned man trying to get through the door before it's shut upon him:

Gonna sleep down in the parlor
And relive my dreams
I'll close my eyes and I wonder
If everything is as hollow as it seems
When you think that you've lost everything
You find out you can always lose a little more
I been to Sugar Town, I shook the sugar down
Now I'm trying to get to heaven before they close the door.

The song speaks to everyone who has been hit by the brutal midlife realization that the window for achievement or redemption is remorselessly closing. 'Not Dark Yet' develops the theme. Death is not abstract now, and it's not under Dylan's control. It is setting the terms, and he is going to have to adjust to them:

Shadows are falling and I've been here all day
It's too hot to sleep, time is running away.

The realization leaves him stalled and disoriented. The wave of faith has withdrawn, and night is coming:

I was born here and I'll die here against my will
I know it looks like I'm moving, but I'm standing still
Every nerve in my body is so vacant and numb
I can't even remember what it was I came here to get away
from
Don't even hear a murmur of a prayer
It's not dark yet, but it's getting there.

As our time runs out, so does our freedom, a point made with laconic resignation in the opening lines of another song from the *Time Out of Mind* sessions, the majestic *Mississippi*, later rerecorded for 2001's *Love and Theft*:

Every step of the way we walk the line
Your days are numbered, so are mine

Time is pilin' up, we struggle and we scrape
We're all boxed in, nowhere to escape.

Yet loss brings release, too, and forgiveness:

Well my ship's been split to splinters and it's sinking fast
I'm drownin' in the poison, got no future, got no past
But my heart is not weary, it's light and it's free
I've got nothin' but affection for all those who've sailed with
me.

— 'Mississippi'

Time Out of Mind is a sombre album, but it closes on a different note, with the long, dreamlike 'Highlands'. Here we find Dylan wandering around, lost and confused. He flirts with a waitress, dodges a mangy dog, looks with envy at the young lovers in the park ('Well, I'd trade places with any of them / In a minute, if I could'), and wishes someone would push back the clock for him. But all the while he's got a vision of a better place, a land of healing, the Highlands ('gentle and fair / Honeysuckle blooming in the wildwood air'). He doesn't know how to get there, but he's working on it:

Well, my heart's in the Highlands at the break of day
Over the hills and far away
There's a way to get there and I'll figure it out somehow
But I'm already there in my mind
And that's good enough for now.

How do you find your promised land? If you're Dylan, you search in your past. In the two decades since 'Time Out of Mind', Dylan has continually returned to his sources. Not to his folk roots this time, but further back, back to the songs of his childhood — Christmas carols, Sinatra classics, and the American standards he heard on the wireless back in Duluth. He has produced albums of these songs — *uncovering* them, as he puts it: 'Lifting them out of the grave and bringing them into the light of day'.¹ And in revitalizing the songs, he has revitalized himself and his creative imagination too. The result has been another creative peak, *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, released in 2020.

The album reveals another new Dylan, an aged crooner, with a sweeter voice, a playful attitude to life, and breath-taking assurance. Mortality is

¹ Andy Greene, 'Bob Dylan Will "Uncover" Frank Sinatra Classics on New Album', Rolling Stone, December 9, 2014, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/bob-dylan-will-uncover-frank-sinatra-classics-on-new-album-52143/>

still a theme, but it's handled with a new ease — not the ease of detachment now, but the ease of acceptance. There's a door again, with a sinister Black Rider guarding it:

Black Rider Black Rider tell me when — tell me how
If there ever was a time then let it be now
Let me go through — open the door
My soul is distressed my mind is at war.
— 'Black Rider'

But Dylan's seen through this bogeyman. He's a con, like Monty Python's Black Knight:

Don't hug me — don't flatter me — don't turn on the charm
I'll take out a sword and have to hack off your arm.

Dylan can disarm him with a song, pension him off:

Some enchanted evening I'll sing you a song
Black Rider Black Rider you've been on the job too long.

Dylan's made it through the lonesome valley of 'Trying to Get to Heaven'. He's back in control, not of death itself, but of his attitude to it.

As for himself, Dylan knows what to do now. He's going to do with himself what we must do with everything in the end. In the almost unbearably poignant 'I've Made Up My Mind to Give Myself to You', he sings about letting go, about giving oneself to another. He's singing to a lover, and to posterity too. His legacy is himself — the multitudinous Dylan he has created — and he's giving it to us:

I've traveled from the mountains to the sea
I hope that the gods go easy with me
I knew you'd say yes, I'm saying it too
I've made up my mind to give myself to you.

And, finally, he's found that visionary land he was looking for. It's not in the highlands after all, but down in the flatlands, at the southern end of Route 1, way down in Key West:

Key West is the place to be
If you're looking for immortality
Key West is paradise divine
Key West is fine and fair
If you lost your mind, you'll find it there

Key West is on the horizon line.

— ‘Key West (Philosopher Pirate)’

Dylan knows how to get there now. He knew all along really. He just has to tune in to that pirate radio station that has been playing in his head for eight decades and keep on the road (‘Stay on the road / follow the highway sign’). He’s heading to a place of old songs, old rituals, and old stories, of gaudy flowers and intoxicating plants. It’s never winter there, and you can hide out ‘under the sun / Under the radar — under the gun’. It is a place for outsiders like him, ‘Like Ginsberg, Corso and Kerouac / Like Louie and Jimmy and Buddy and all of the rest’. It’s a place that contains multitudes. It will be a while before he gets there, we hope, but he’s in the clear now.

I love you, Bob.

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