

This is not a Love Story

*A personal tribute to Bob Dylan
By Danish songwriter Michael Falch*

Back in 1970, when I was 14 years old, my childhood hero, John Lennon, and my future star, Neil Young, each had a chamber in my heart. I felt I didn't have room for more songwriters in there — not even for Bob Dylan.

I was living in a remote Danish small town close to the German border, and I was playing in an acoustic duo with the son of the local preacherman. This boy was really into Dylan — just like every single person I have worked closely with all through my life ever since. I have always been surrounded by hardcore Dylanfreaks!

In our duo we played various Dylan songs like “Don't Think Twice”, “Just Like a Woman” and “Girl from the North Country”, and back then I did admit that Dylan obviously was a great songwriter, but with boyish confidence I actually thought that our versions of the songs were better than his own —ha ha! —just like Jimi Hendrix' version of “All Along the Watchtower” clearly was better than Dylan's, right? My harmonica playing was for sure less annoying and destructive than Dylan's with all his devilish treble tones that sounded as if he deliberately used it as some kind of sabotage weapon. Or his out-of-tune guitars here and there, worst of all in “Queen Jane Approximately”, so out of tune that it made my young, sensitive ears crumble, and on top of it all, Dylan's magpie-raspy voice that sometimes even sounded like a cruel prophecy of Johnny Rotten to emerge many years later.

Anyway, I had the feeling, that I was not getting the full picture. The genius of Bob Dylan was still just lurking like a ghost in the shadows for me.

Dylan seemed to worship some kind of constant rebellion, hiding away, not talking between songs on stage anymore, creating mystery, breaking out of every kind of “spirit of the times”. Never letting himself be captured by anyone or anything, always making people wonder, what was going on. No Mister Nice Guy here! He took sarcasm to a new level compared to The Beatles' charming and funny way of joking during the press meetings with the naive and bewildered media in the Sixties.

Was Dylan just weirder than everybody else; more intelligent; was he hiding a serious shyness behind these manners; did he suffer from some kind of mental disorder that actually made him unsuited for showbiz?

Whatever the reasons, it was not showbusiness as usual with Dylan. It was like he might kill you, not with kindness, though. All the loving Christian virtues and the hippie philosophy inspired by Buddhism didn't seem to be integrated into Dylan's mental and spiritual attitude, as if being rude, sneering and even brutal back then was his way of creating his public persona. And at the same time, he was maybe trying to survive all the smothering and the endless highway of stupid questions, and all the hysterical booing that followed in the wake of the famous “going electric” Newport incident in '65.

That was probably a defining period for Dylan that drove many admirers away from him and got him so many new rock fans.

As I grew older, Dylan seemed to me to be talking to the mind rather than the heart. To be honest, I could tell he had a tremendous amount of courage, and he seemed to avoid any kind of unintentional sentimentality and romanticizing, sometimes to a point as if he was a follower of the aesthetics of ugliness and creative destruction.

Did I have a point back then? Was Dylan's super sharp intelligence merely intellectual and not very emotional, except from the anger, the mockery, the disillusion and the melancholy? Yes, he was only singing to the mind, I concluded when I was 20. Neil Young was also singing to the heart, and, incidentally, Dylan's "Knockin' on Heaven's Door" was actually more or less lifted from Neil Young's "Helpless". I tried to prove that to anyone who would listen back then.

I moved to the Danish capital and formed my rock band, MALURT, only to meet another Dylanfreak. He went on stage with me and my band one night in Copenhagen to sing his newly released song called "Hungry Heart". Bruce Springsteen, yes – and he was yet another previously "new Bob Dylan".

One year later, I also met Neil Young in Denmark, and while talking to him I remembered how his old bandmate, Stephen Stills, once said that Neil Young just wanted to be Bob Dylan. I knew that Neil Young in the liner notes to a compilation album had written that the critics had been tough on an album of his, but that he chose to "listen closer to Bob", who had liked it.

I also finally understood that John Lennon's songwriting had changed dramatically after he began listening to Dylan. There would have been no "You've Got to Hide your Love Away", "In My Life", "Come Together" or "Working Class Hero" without the influence from Dylan. That much I got.

So, to MY heroes Dylan was the hero. I was surrounded, I was cornered, I was about to surrender.

My career as a rock musician in Denmark took off in the Eighties, and at that time Dylan was in his least impressive creative period of all, but right then, at his rock bottom, I finally hit the wall and fell to the ground. When I woke up again, I had turned into another disciple of Dylan. Just like all of you!

The year was 1986, and I went to see a friend in the countryside. That trip became my own little Damascus Road Experience. He was a Scotsman and another die-hard Dylan-fan.

On his table, I saw the Dylan compilation of five albums, "Biograph". With a feeling of needing to finally get things straight, I sat down on the floor with the lyric sheet and started just reading all the lyrics. My friend didn't see me for the rest of that day. I just kept reading song after song, more and more astonished. The words of Bob Dylan finally got to me for good.

Then I started to listen to the box set from a to z, and after all these years his voice now came to me in a way that made me finally comprehend what a marvelous singer he also was. The songs hit me in such a powerful way that after this long listening session, I really could not see the reason why anybody in the whole wide world should bother writing songs anymore at all. Nothing could compare

to Dylan's words, anyway, I realized – the achievements of other songwriters were merely just a sad waste of time. There was no need for that; Dylan had been here. Everything was already written on a level that no one else could match.

Bob Dylan was like the Soren Kierkegaard of rock music, and the Shakespeare of showbiz. He was not just a performer, he contained multitudes — there was a whole theatre company inside him. I finally got it.

For many months after that experience, I did not attempt to write any new songs myself. It felt profane even for one second to think that a Danish songwriter could allow himself to mess with words on an existential field, where Dylan was the only one needed.

It took me some time to recover from that shock, but after a while I realized that in spite of the magnitude of his songwriting, maybe the world needed other voices and other words than Dylan's, after all.

Many years later, I met Dylan's guitar player, Charlie Sexton, in a studio in Austin, Texas, where I accompanied my friend Poul, another Danish songwriter, who was recording an album there, and over the next years we met with Sexton every time Dylan was playing in Denmark. One night we were backstage with Charlie Sexton and the rest of Dylan's band, hanging out and talking until it was time for them to go on stage. Everybody was now just waiting for Dylan himself to arrive to the backstage room.

Poul and I looked at each other, suddenly very nervous. What were we going to say to Bob if we got the chance when he entered the room? Except from the band we were only people in there. What do you actually say to a person, who is like the supreme high priest of rock music? He was the Pope, or even maybe the Pope's boss...

Standing there in the backstage room, I suddenly remembered a funny story that Canadian rock musician Bryan Adams once told to a magazine. He was in a hotel in Paris, and he wanted to go for a walk before his soundcheck. It was raining heavily, and when he exited the hotel, he stopped to open his umbrella. Beside him a man was standing with a hood over his head, looking pretty much like an old monk.

An astonished Bryan Adams suddenly realized that this man was actually Bob Dylan. With a great sense of humor, Adams explains how his brain was working overtime trying to figure out what to say to Dylan, now he finally had the chance. He came up with one line after another in his head, but everything sounded much too corny and phony. Before Adams decides what to say, Dylan all of a sudden turns towards Adams and just says: "Hi, Bryan" and immediately walks straight out into the rain without an umbrella and disappears.

I told Poul the story there in the backstage room, and we could not decide on any words to say to this man either. For Poul, Dylan had been like the guiding light ever since he was a boy, and for me as a grown man, Dylan had caused some kind of a spiritual awakening. What do you say to that kind of a man?

We looked at each other, and without needing to talk more about it, we just got up, said good luck to the band, fled the room just before Dylan entered and went into hiding in the audience. There is nothing you can say.

Of course, this has got to do with the status and the charisma of the man. There is such an immense admiration and respect for Dylan among almost all other artists. And some kind of unapproachability about him. I mean, he didn't even talk to Obama in the White House, did he? Everybody knows that this man is one of the most intelligent and gifted human beings in modern culture. He seems incorruptible, he never panders to anything, never seems to have a need for acceptance and being likeable at all, not polite, not kind, not wanting all the love that is flowing towards him – mostly kind of tough, rude, and (especially earlier on) even arrogant and mean. He rarely speaks, he rarely shows up, and if he does, he is much too late – just ask the Nobel Committee in Stockholm.

Actually, he doesn't seem to be the kind of person many would go to for friendship. His behavior is not what I taught my children to copy/paste. And by the way, I once took my three then-teenage daughters to see a Bob Dylan show in Copenhagen as a part of a decent upbringing, I thought. All they experienced, however, was a grumpy, unpleasant old man standing behind a keyboard in one side of the stage during most of the show, even sabotaging his greatest tunes. What a shame, they said after the show.

But everybody knows that Bob Dylan is not like other people. That is part of the mystery. It makes him more fascinating than any other artist in the world. We keep wondering about this phenomenon, this strange creature that God maybe planted as some kind of a special agent among us all. We know he is there, watching, thinking, singing, painting, and hopefully right now busy writing the next book of “Chronicles” that he has promised!

Bob Dylan is not about traditional beauty. He is about “punk beauty” — almost always with that sharp edge and rusty grumble, and the rare and secret Mona Lisa smile and that special something in his eyes. As if they're saying: I know the secret!

More often than not he makes me smile — sometimes he even triggers laughter in me because of his way of emphasizing or twisting words and meanings. As an artistic standpoint, an attitude, a way of being in the world.

As a matter of fact, you can also use him as some kind of a psychological “narrative”. “Remember Bob Dylan!” you may tell yourself whenever you are going to stand cool, calm and collected and not get too emotional and concerned about other people's opinions. In that case: Bring on Bob!

These days, Bob Dylan also has a chamber in my heart. And apart from philosopher Soren Kierkegaard and the main character from volume two of The Bible, the human being who makes me wonder the most is Bob Dylan.

“How does it feel?” he keeps asking, not delivering any answers, but passing on the question to others. Bob Dylan seems to make everybody wonder. And somehow, that may be the greatest act of love an artist can offer people: To make us wonder.

So — maybe this IS a love story, after all.

Thanks to the University of Tulsa Institute of Bob Dylan Studies and to The University of Southern Denmark for inviting me here. Have a great symposium and good luck with all your work around the world.

Congratulations Bob Dylan, 80 years. Thank you.