

# On a Trail of Bells: Bob Dylan's "Chimes of Freedom"

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One of Bob Dylan's most majestic songs, "Chimes of Freedom" (1964) opens up "the whole wide universe" for its listeners by signifying the scope of human suffering amid a great storm from the skyworld. In dramatic flashing language, the singer describes the awe-inspiring storm that he and his companion witnessed. Whether this event took place in Duluth, Minnesota, Dylan's birthplace on Lake Superior, or in New York City on the Hudson, where he lived in the early 1960s, this great storm becomes, in lyric, an archetypal primordial event that images relationships between humans and the natural world manifest in lightning, thunder and "wild ripping hail." Claps of thunder and flashes of lightning are reminiscent of the peals of bells, swaying back and forth in the turbulent night sky. As preeminent Chicano author Rudolfo Anaya, with deep roots in indigenous New Mexico, has written about the land of his birth and beyond: "We in the Southwest know that every area is inhabited by the spirits of the place" (2009, p. 151). It is this strong sense of place that Dylan exhibits in his songwriting. In Dylan's "Chimes" we can hear the mythopoetic spirits of place such as the Thunder-beings transferring their powers to bless and heal "the deaf an' blind" among others who seek spiritual uplift (Overholt & Callicott, 1982, p. 18, 164). Following Bob Dylan's penchant for time travel, for co-mingling eras and anachronistic events in his narratives, listeners can imagine that the power of origins is transmitted through the storm. "Chimes of Freedom" can be considered a sacred text because it animates energies of creation and symbolically restores a balanced existence for all.

## **Back Story/Soundscape**

Bob Dylan lives in a mythic world. This is evident in his lyrics, his stage ritual, his attire, and his own words in interviews and speeches. What does it mean that he dwells in the world of myth? Dylan lives immersed in a story that is his personal story grafted onto the stories of countless generations of singers and storytellers from multiple world cultures. When he said in the MusiCares speech (2015) that his work is just "extending the line," he is acknowledging the American roots' music that he has built upon and become incorpo-

rated into. Since Dylan understands all time as contemporaneous, past events often appear present-time to him, as when he says in *Chronicles*: “[...] the *Titanic* sinking, the Galveston flood, John Henry driving steel, John Hardy shooting a man on the West Virginia line. All this was current, played out and in the open. This was the news that I considered, followed, and kept tabs on.” (2004, vol. 1, p. 20). Dylan’s familiarity with historic figures and eras is neither quaint nor just a product of an overactive imagination. Rather, it is evidence of the “mythic present” operating in his worldview (Farrer, 1994, p. 2). On the occasion of his being honored as MusiCares Person of the Year, Dylan was wearing a Navajo silver and turquoise bear paw bolo tie. One could easily imagine the power of Bear was upon him and in him as he delivered his dynamic speech about the great musicians who inspired and influenced him.

Bob Dylan was born into a story – an old story about the spirits of place who inhabit the shore of Lake Superior and the Iron Range further west. In *Chronicles*, Dylan writes about a riveting conversation with Bono. “Bono asked me where I was originally from and I told him the Iron Trail, the Mesabi Iron Range. ‘What does Mesabi mean?’ he asked. I told him it was an Ojibwa word, means Land of Giants” (2004, vol. 1, p. 175). According to Ojibwa oral tradition, this land in present-day northern Minnesota was once glaciated and guarded by giants (Johnston, 1990, p. 21, 23). A culture hero had to banish the giants so that the land was made habitable for human beings (p. 25). Ojibwa worldview recognizes all elements of the natural world and seemingly inanimate objects like sacred stones as persons (Nabokov, 2006, p. 28). Weather phenomena such as thunder and rain are also accorded personhood. Although perhaps unknown to him, this origin story has guided and shaped events in Dylan’s life, because the spirits of place preside in the land of one’s birth. In the Spring, bears will be emerging in rugged habitat along Lake Superior, north of Duluth, Minnesota, Dylan’s birthplace. Spiritually, there can be a transference of bear power for strength and healing to the inhabitants of the land of the bears. Sometimes it is songs that carry the bear power. In *Where the Two Came to Their Father: A Navaho War Ceremonial*, the great mythologist Joseph Campbell wrote: “Spider Woman, Bat Woman, the Cutting Reeds, and the Bear That Tracks are strange to us. That is because America is strange to us. Our fairy world is that of Europe, not of our adopted continent. And yet, it is just possible that the powers of the continent are at work in us, even so” (1943/1969, p. 62). I would like to suggest that Bob Dylan has been imbued with these powers of place ever since he was a little child. For him, the sound of bells reverberating through his consciousness has marked his receptiveness to the powers of the continent.

Bob Dylan was born into a soundscape of foghorns, bells, and train whistles in northern Minnesota, along the Medicine Line border to Canada. The metallic sounds of iron mining were in the air. The “mad mystic hammering of the wild ripping hail,” and “bells of lightning and its thunder” were familiar to him (“Chimes”). As he was growing up, he would come to know other sounds of the natural world like a hoot owl or a cuckoo hollering, and the ocean’s roar. Dylan’s childhood in the 1940s and early 1950s was crisscrossed by both crystal clear and crackling radio reception, signaling the entrée of new worlds of music provided by AM stations from as far away as Louisiana (Loder, 2017, p. 312). By the time Bob Dylan read Woody Guthrie’s *Bound for Glory*, he was already on an imagined mythic trail that would lead to sites of struggle and transformation, like the crossroads of rural southern blues or the tracks where the Southern crosses the Yellow Dog. Dylan could hear the echoes of ancestors and read the pain of the American past in the places that he visited or claimed to inhabit. From experiencing the power of work songs, he created a new musical vision forged of links between past and present that merged human strife with the beauty of sky, earth, and waters of the continent.

Ever since Bob Dylan was a child, known as Bobby Zimmerman, he loved and responded to the sound of bells. In his memoir *Chronicles*, Dylan writes that he has always loved the sound of train whistles, bells, and foghorns, although the latter were sometimes frightening (2004, vol. 1, p. 274). This constellation of sounds remains a core spindle upon which he spins his stories – tells the tale. It’s “Up to Me” (1985). Due to the unique geography of Duluth, Minnesota, the ringing bells and the foghorns, in particular, occasionally became conflated as they are carried through the air along with claps of thunder during a heavy storm. Throughout Dylan’s singing career, he has sung classic blues songs and songs of his own composition that contain bell imagery. Having been born in St. Mary’s Hospital in Duluth – “the bells of St. Mary, how sweet they chime” (“Beyond the Horizon”) – bells have become a touchstone of Dylan’s life. When Dylan was in first grade at Alice School in Hibbing, Minnesota, it was noted that: “He thinks the ringing of the recess bell means time to go home. It takes a few extra trips to figure out how long the school day is” (Engel, 1997, p. 56). Perhaps this is the first time that Dylan associated the sound of a bell with freedom.

There were other early indications that Bob Dylan was entranced by, if not obsessed by, bells. In the early 1960s Dylan wrote a series of epitaphs, collected in *Bob Dylan Lyrics, 1962-1985*. The first epitaph contains the lines “an’ so on spangled streets/ an’ country

roads/ I hear sleigh bells/ jingle jangle/ virgin girls/ far into the field/ sing an' laugh/ with flickerin' voices/ softly fadin'/ I stop an' smile/ an' rest awhile" (1985, p. 106). This poem is somewhat reminiscent of the moment in Robert Frost's "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening" (1922) when in the snowy silence his horse "gives his harness bells a shake" (pp. 1788-1789). The sound of sleigh bells opens Dylan's *Christmas in the Heart* album (2009) where "Winter Wonderland" and "Silver Bells" usher in the spirit of the season. In a related interview, when Bill Flanagan asks Dylan: "What was Christmas like around your town when you were growing up?" Dylan responds: "Well, you know, plenty of snow, jingle bells, Christmas carolers going from house to house, sleighs in the streets, town bells ringing, nativity plays." (Flanagan, 2009). In this glimpse of Dylan's childhood, the sound of bells defines this classic memory for him.

The third epitaph contains the lines: "the underground's gone deeper/ says the old chimney sweeper/ the underground's outa work/ sing the bells of New York/ the underground's gone more dangerous/ sing the bells of Los Angeles/ the underground's gone/ cry the bells of San Juan/ but where has it gone to/ ring the bells of Toronto" (*Bob Dylan Lyrics, 1962-1985*, 1985, p. 108). Thoughts of what lies underground come easily to a young poet who grew up in the land of deep iron ore mining. Dylan had traveled to New York on a pilgrimage in 1961 to meet his idol Woody Guthrie who was suffering from Huntington's disease. In 1963, Dylan recited his tribute poem "Last Thoughts on Woody Guthrie" in New York's Town Hall. The poem contains the line "and yer bell's bangin' loudly but you can't hear its beat," a sad auditory image of the life force ebbing in Woody.

### **Blues and Bells**

From his early Minneapolis days, before New York, Dylan had heard and been transfixed by blues songs like Leadbelly's "Bourgeois Blues" (*Chronicles*, 2004, vol. 1, p. 53). Leadbelly's well-known "Midnight Special" became a blues standard. This train and prison song contains the lines: "Now let the Midnight Special shine her ever lovin' light on me/ When you gets up in the morning, when that big bell ring/ You go to marching to the table, where you meet the same damn thing." (Ledbetter, 1960, p. 106-109). This loud bell was an emblem of imprisonment, the antithesis of freedom. When Dylan burst upon the recording scene in 1962 with his first album, *Bob Dylan*, he laid down the Blind Lemon Jefferson track "See That My Grave is Kept Clean" as the last song, underscoring its power and significance. The lines: "Did you ever hear them church bells tone/ Means another

poor boy is dead and gone” are reminiscent of Harry Belafonte’s later version of “Tone the Bell Easy,” an old spiritual. On one of his 1990s albums of folk material, Dylan covered Blind Willie McTell’s “Broke Down Engine” with the lines: “Feel like a broke down engine,/ Ain’t got no whistle or bell.” This is one of the best images of train whistles and bells as symbolic of the life force within a singer. In “Shooting Star,” Dylan’s own song, released in 1989, the bridge lines are: “Listen to the engines. Listen to the bell/ As the last fire truck from hell goes rolling by”. This disappearance of the fire truck takes the life force with it. In the Bob Dylan Archive, the 7th verse of the manuscript begins: “Listen to the bells, breathe out a sigh” an indication that bells are closely associated with life breath.

Throughout Dylan’s canon, there are many songs that have focused on bell imagery or contain bell references. “Church Bell Blues” became “Call Letter Blues,” according to Clinton Heylin (2010, p. 35). The lyrics for the unrecorded “Bell Tower Blues” appear in *More Blood, More Tracks, Stories in Press*. The opening handwritten lines of “Bell Tower Blues” are: “Climbed upon the bell tower to gaze around the terrain/ I couldn’t find you anywhere, you were gone like a northern train”. Having “walked all night listening to the church bells tone” in “Church Bell Blues,” the singer climbs a bell tower for perspective on his life in “Bell Tower Blues”. Other folk/blues songs that Dylan has sung over the years feature bell imagery. From Pete Seeger’s “The Bells of Rhymney,” a Welsh freedom song, to Kris Kristofferson’s “They Killed Him,” in part about Martin Luther King Jr.’s “bells of freedom,” Dylan’s song selections have revealed the bravery of ringing bells. Bell imagery also appears in the morose Dylan song “Can’t Escape from You” wherein “The dead bells are ringing/ My train is overdue” to more joyous songs such as “Summer Days” with “Wedding bells ringin’” or “Dreamin’ of You.”

Some of Dylan’s songs are seemingly self-referential, such as “Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again.” Well known lyrics are: “Well, Shakespeare, he’s in the alley/ With his pointed shoes and his bells/ Speaking to some French girl who says she knows me well”. This song reveals Dylan’s “mythic present” time collapse method of composition where Shakespeare and Dylan co-exist in the same timeless era. The combination of bells and shoes in the lyric also point toward a cross-reading with the old-English nursery rhyme “Ride a Cock Horse to Banbury Cross.” A lady is riding horseback with “Rings on her fingers and bells on her toes,/ And she shall make music wherever she goes.” This is an example of Dylan’s playful transformative use of quotation from children’s rhymes.

## Bells of Freedom

The 1964 masterpiece “Chimes of Freedom” that appears on the singer’s album *Another Side of Bob Dylan* is full of electrically-charged emotion. Lightning bolts are depicted as bells – “majestic bells of bolts” – and conflated also with chimes – “chimes of freedom flashing.” Even “the echo of the wedding bells” is “dissolved into the bells of the lightning.” The singer and his partner are “spellbound” during the celestial display that underscores the importance of the Civil Rights movement by emphasizing freedom. Bob Dylan performed this powerful song in 1993 at President Bill Clinton’s inauguration. Recorded a quarter of a century later, “Blind Willie McTell,” another masterpiece, tells the story of slavery in the deep south. Imagining the trauma of slavery, Dylan writes: “See them big plantations burning/ Hear the cracking of the whips/ Smell the sweet magnolia blooming/ See the ghosts of slavery ships/ I can hear them tribes a-moaning/ Hear the undertaker’s bell/ Nobody can sing the blues/ Like Blind Willie McTell.” In this direct address imploring the listener to imaginatively experience the unspeakable horrors of slavery of African peoples, the inclusion of “the undertaker’s bell” focuses the senses on a sharp peal of pain, reminding the listener of those underground, as in “See That My Grave is Kept Clean.” Mark Knopfler’s closing guitar harmonic on “Blind Willie McTell” becomes a prayer.

The beautiful dramatic song “Ring Them Bells” is written with the same sensibility as “Blind Willie McTell.” The fourth stanza opens with: “Ring them bells for the blind and the deaf/Ring them bells for all of us who are left”. The repetition of “ring them bells” in the short lyric lines evokes the quick sway of bells ringing from side to side. “Ring Them Bells” is a mythic song whose scope spans the created natural world of the four directions where “the four winds blow.” The bells peal blessings and compassion for everyone including the “poor man’s son” and protect the “shepherd [who] is asleep” forgetting to watch the “mountains [...] filled/ With lost sheep.” This shepherd prefigures the watchman on the Titanic in “Tempest,” who is asleep when “alarm bells were ringing” as the ship was sinking. Bob Dylan himself is a mythic watchman who is a wakeful singer pealing out a warning about unseen dangers.

Throughout Dylan’s career, trains have served as a dominant metaphor for the love of motion, travel, and freedom. Old folk standards like “Hear the Whistle Blow 100 Miles” were the model for many 1960s singers’ repertoire. In the song “Duquesne Whistle,” Dylan invites the listener to hear the whistle on top of the train boiler. “Listen to that Duquesne

whistle blowin’/ Blowin’ like it’s gonna blow my blues away”. These whistles are still used on old steam trains for signaling and warning. In “Dear Landlord,” a blowing steamboat whistle likewise signals internal change within the singer.

### Voices and Gongs

During the 2014 North American Tour, Dylan’s stage show opened with the sound of a large gong. This striking sound awakened and focused the audience for the performance to come. In *Chronicles*, Dylan writes about both bells and gongs. “I might have broken through to something. It was like you wake up from a deep and drugged slumber and somebody strikes a little silver gong and you come to your senses” (2004, p. 166). This heightened awareness of significant events, cast in musical language, can be said to be shamanic. In performance, Dylan and his four-piece band are all the more intense and mysterious for not speaking to the audience beneath the watchful crowned-eye logo on the curtain backdrop. This all-seeing, all-knowing eye is reminiscent of the powerful cloaked, one-eyed Odin of Norse mythology who is a mythic archetype. In the Bob Dylan Archive a variant verse for “Thunder on the Mountain” says: “My soul beginning to expand/ North (Gods of the North)/ Try to be my understanding.” The Greek mythological world is also represented on stage with an alabaster bust of Athena on stage left near Dylan’s piano and his Oscar for “Things Have Changed.” These ancient images appear to be protective figures guarding and beautifying the scene.

In a 2011 interview, Dylan stated: “I’m pretty much interested in people, history, myth, and portraits; people of any stripes.” (Elderfield, 2011). If myth is understood to be the basis of truth for a culture, rather than the popular notion of falsehood, then it is understandable that Dylan gravitates toward both western and nonwestern forms of art. This is reflected in his “ancient voice,” according to Bono, and is why Dylan could write the lines “Some people they tell me/ I got the blood of the land in my voice” (“I Feel a Change Comin’ On”). The land is lovingly evoked in “Moonlight,” a song on the *Love and Theft* album. The singer invites the lover to meet amid the flowers, trees, and clouds. “For whom does the bell toll for, love? It tolls for you and me.” are classic lines repurposed from John Donne. In the Bob Dylan Archive this line is repeated in variation, including the response: “It tolls for thee.” In the “Moonlight” manuscript, Dylan has written in blue: “I dream the mythic the rushing sound/ dream spiral winding/ up to the stars.” The mythic bell tolls for the whole universe, as it did in “Ring Them Bells.” And, in “Someone’s Got a

Hold of My Heart,” there are variant lyrics: “Them distant bells they touch my ears/and in the coolness of evening a vision appears.” This direct connection of bells with vision remains one of the great sources and inspirations for Dylan’s artistry. As Dylan sings in “Early Roman Kings,” “I ain’t dead yet, my bell still rings!”

### **Chimes Perspectives**

“Chimes of Freedom” is one of the most beloved of Dylan’s songs. Clinton Heylin in *Bob Dylan: Behind the Shades Revisited* mentions that Dylan had been on a long road trip through America in 1964 when he sat in the back seat of a friend’s car reworking lines in “Chimes of Freedom.” Heylin writes: “The refrain ‘strikin for the gentle/ strikin for the kind/ strikin for the crippled ones/ an strikin for the blind’ had obviously been haunting him” (1991/2001, p. 147). According to Sean Wilentz: “Making music out of nature’s sights and sounds had attracted Dylan before, in his mystical song “Lay Down your Weary Tune” (2010, p. 81). Indeed, as Michael Gray has informed us, “[...] with this ‘sound’ – the echo, the voice, the chiselled word shapes, the sculptured, hard-grained phrasing – Dylan creates a world” (2000, p. 128). It is this carefully crafted world that invites in the abused and disenfranchised, as well as all listeners inclusively. Mike Marqusee in *Wicked Messenger, Bob Dylan and the 1960s (Chimes of Freedom, Revised and Expanded)* has stated of the song: “It was Dylan’s most sweeping vision of solidarity with all those marginalized by a monolithic society” (2005, p. 101). Also, Robert Shelton in 1986 declared that: “This is perhaps Dylan’s most political song and his greatest love song [...]” (1997, p. 220). It could be said that “Chimes of Freedom” compassionately generates the release of healing power from the skyworld to persons in need.

### **Tambourines and Sacred Metal**

One of the early masterpieces of the Dylan song bag is “Mr. Tambourine Man.” Released in 1964 on *Bringing It All Back Home*, this visionary song has fascinated generations of Dylan listeners, because its magic realism imagery beckons the listeners to journey along with the singer to realms unknown, across the sky and beneath the sea. This is a great song of liberation that frees individuals to celebrate their identities as human beings in a new and abiding way. In the *Biograph* notes (“Mr. Tambourine Man”, 1997), Dylan recalled: “Mr. Tambourine Man [...] was inspired by Bruce Langhorne [...] he had this gigantic tambourine. It was like, really big. It was as big as a wagon wheel. He was playing, and this

vision of him playing this tambourine just stuck in my mind.” The Langhorne tambourine now resides in the Bob Dylan Archive, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

This special tambourine can also be identified as a Turkish frame drum with added small metal bells. It appears to me that the bells give the instrument an otherworldly character, raising the spirit and the consciousness of listeners. This instrument has a handmade quality and is quite similar in design to shaman drums of northwest Siberia, Russia, where I have frequently traveled. As an ironworker, Dylan can be seen – in a cross-cultural musical context – as a mythic blacksmith ringing shamanic bells such as those inside the rim of this famous tambourine.

In Khanty culture in Siberia iron is considered sacred. Shamans’ ritual regalia is covered with metal cones, discs, and bells of various shapes. As my Khanty friend, novelist and reindeer herder Yeremai Aipin (2019) has written: “[...] with the accompaniment of the ringing bell, some obligatory sacred songs were performed-myths of the Bear Feast ceremony. In some sacred ceremonies shaman drums were also decorated with ringing bells.” Dylan can be seen to spiritually live in a mythic world such as this. In *Chronicles*, drawing upon his love of world mythology and ironworking arts, Dylan has cast the first part of his life story narrative into a broad pattern of illness and healing wherein he as blacksmith (elder brother to shaman in Siberian cultures) eventually becomes his own healer with the aid of spirit guides and the remarkable transformative power of bells.

### **Northern Weather**

It is no wonder that Bob Dylan has created extensive weather imagery in his musical repertoire, since he grew up in the harsh but beautiful landscape of northern Minnesota where the winters are rugged. In an interview with Mikal Gilmore in *Rolling Stone*, Dylan stated – after describing the landscape, changing seasons, and culture of his homeland – that: “[...] when you grow up that way, it stays in you” (2012, p. 46). Further, Dylan described his native grounds for Bill Flanagan: “Up north the weather is more extreme – frostbite in the winter, mosquito-ridden in the summer, no air conditioning when I grew up, steam heat in the winter and you had to wear a lot of clothes when you went outdoors. Your blood gets thick. It’s the land of 10,000 lakes – lot of hunting and fishing. Indian country, Ojibwe, Chippewa, Lakota, birch trees, open pit mines, bears and wolves – the air is raw” (Flanagan, 2017). The cold sleet, rain and hail pouring out of the thunderheads glisten in the lightning as this moisture portends the snow soon to come. Wind is the

animating force that drives it forth and sends a cold cleansing upon the inhabitants of the land. It is out of this exposure that Dylan developed his sensibility toward the pared down, elemental winter of the soul that yearns for shelter, protection, and restoration. With his vision of icy hail, sung out over a vibrant acoustic guitar, Bob Dylan created “Chimes of Freedom” as one of the greatest healing songs the world has ever known.

### Coda

Noted historian Douglas Brinkley has written in “Bob Dylan’s America” that Dylan “plays shaman and sprinkles your life with magic dust. When a musician friend turns ill, Dylan plays one of that musician’s songs in concert as a personal tribute.” (2009, p. 76). Whether symbolically functioning as blacksmith or shaman, Dylan’s performances echo the peals of bells that generate blessings and healing energy for listeners. When I attended a Dylan concert near Denver, Colorado, in late October 2017, the band stunned the audience by playing, as an encore, Tom Petty’s song “Learning to Fly.” Just weeks after Petty had passed away, Dylan sang him up into the skyworld where he might hear the pure, heavenly sound of bells.

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