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Dylan at Newport

by Kresha Richman Warnock

The summer of 1963, my folks packed us into our blue Nash Rambler to travel from our Seattle home to see our East Coast family. My Uncle Herb was best friends with George Wein, the founder of the Newport Folk Festival. We got tickets.

On Sunday night that year, Joan Baez already “the girl on the half shell” introduced the young Bobby Dylan to the gathered crowd. He sang “With God On Our Side” as a duet with the young queen.

The droning shuffle of the acoustic guitar, the alto harmonies by Baez, the words, a poetic exposition of the violent side of American exceptionalism. This chubby fourteen-year-old, with the pointy glasses and button down shirt tucked into her pleated skirt was in heaven.

It must have been earlier that day that my uncle had gotten us into the musicians’ tent. A passing summer storm dropped rain on the huge tarp. Everyone seemed to have spoons – it was a spoon drum circle. This wasn’t the famous folk singers; maybe they had dressing rooms or VIP quarters; I don’t know. For sure Dylan and Baez weren’t there. But I have never been in a room with such joyous cacophony. This, this was the world that child/teen/someday young woman Kresha wanted to be a part of.

Rock and roll, was starting to be the teen-age thing. The Beach Boys surfed to the #1 hit of the year in 1963. I can still sing you snatches from almost all of the songs on the Billboard list of the top 100. But it was folk music that centered me, energized me. My dad bought me a little Martin guitar when I was twelve, and I spent hours sitting on the Crayola-yellow, flowered bedspread in my sunny bedroom, strummin' and singin'.

Every couple of weeks, a brown manila envelope arrived in the mail from New York City holding the mimeographed sheets of *Broadside Magazine*. a few pages of new "topical" songs stapled together, 8-1/2 x 11.

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BLOWN' IN THE WIND
by BOB DYLAN © 1962 BOB DYLAN

How many roads must a man walk down before he's called a man
How many seas must a white dove sail before he comes in the land
How many times must the cannonballs fly before we're forever banned
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind. The answer is
blowin' in the wind.

HOW MANY TEARS CAN A MOUNTAIN DRIP, BEFORE IT'S WASHED IN THE SEA
HOW MANY YEARS CAN SOME PEOPLE TRIP, BEFORE THEY'RE ALLOWED TO BE FREE
HOW MANY TIMES CAN A MAN FIX HIS HEAD, AND PRETEND HE JUST DOESN'T SEE
THE ANSWER, MY FRIEND, IS...

HOW MANY TIMES MUST A MAN LOOK UP, BEFORE HE CAN SEE THE SKY
HOW MANY TIMES MUST ONE MAN SWAY, BEFORE HE CAN FEEL PEOPLE CHEER
HOW MANY TIMES WILL IT TAKE 'TIL HE KNOWS THAT TOO MANY PEOPLE HAVE DIED
THE ANSWER, MY FRIEND, IS...

Broadside Magazine, May 1962

I still have a plastic tote filled with these magazines that I've carried around with me from move to move all through my adult life. This is the cover sheet of the late May 1962 issue. I figured out the tune, and if I've got my chronology right, that means I knew and played "Blowin in the Wind", before it was released on *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* the next year, before Peter, Paul and Mary turned it into a pop hit in 1963. That makes me kind of proud now. At fourteen, it made me feel like I was a member of an elite, folky in-group.

The next summer, I got to take my first solo trip to the East Coast.

Once again, my aunt and uncle packed me into the car with the older cousins, and we drove to Newport for the folk festival. I was sitting in the third row, when Bob Dylan strode onto the stage, hit the twangy first notes of an electric guitar and began sing/shouting out the words to "I Ain't Gonna Work on Maggie's Farm No More."

The older couple (they were at least thirty-five) behind us began to boo. My aunt shushed me as I tried to turn around and tell them to shut up. I listened but felt my teenage heart breaking. Should I stay or should I go?

You've heard the stories: Folk icon Pete Seeger was so upset by the introduction of electric music on this stage that he tried to cut the electric cord. (Pete has denied this and that great man is now with his ancestors, the world misses his gentle soul, and it was sixty years ago.) Many booed.

I cried. Could I be loyal to the acoustic music I loved and sang and played? Would I ever get to be one of those spoon-clanging folksingers I longed to call my kith and kin? Or should I deepen my loyalty to this charismatic, angry, song-writing genius musician, who had the audacity to go electric?

The last time I saw Dylan on stage was about ten years ago at a big outdoor conference on the White River in Indianapolis. He moves more stiffly, but the electric schtick has worked out okay for him. I sang and played my own little acoustic Martin, mostly in private, until my voice got too croaky to be pleasant to listen to.

Dylan's voice has aged too. Whatever guitar he's playing, whatever his backup band, he has provided part of the soundtrack of my life.



Photo of Kresha Richman Warnock, submitted by the author