Through the Eyes of Tom Joad:
Patterns of American Idealism, Bob Dylan, and the Folk Protest Movement
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Bob Dylan’s approach to folk music initially appeared compatible with the political outlook of the older left-wing sponsors of Sing Out! and Broadside magazines. However, with pre-World War II attitudes, such sponsors generally viewed folk music as a way to understand or promote the common beliefs and aspirations of entire social groups. Dylan, by contrast, often used songs to focus on the feelings of unique individuals. He also challenged accepted beliefs, and he used symbolism and themes drawn from nature. In all these respects, Dylan’s early lyrics and writings reflected an intellectual tradition of American idealism established by Ralph Waldo Emerson and passed down to Dylan primarily through John Steinbeck and Woody Guthrie.

Introduction and Background

When 19-year-old Bob Dylan left Minnesota in January of 1961 in search of his idol, Woody Guthrie, a distinct phase in the popularity of folk music was then at its height. It had begun in 1958 with the unexpected ascendancy of the Kingston Trio’s good-natured hit, “Tom Dooley,” and it would end just over a half-dozen years later with Dylan’s embrace of an electric guitar.

In his 1996 survey, When We Were Good: The Folk Revival, the historian Robert Cantwell described the short popular phase of the folk music revival as a widespread social phenomenon. He argued that post-war anti-Communism had largely suppressed folk music’s previous left-wing associations so that, by 1958, a post-World War II generation could reinvent folk music anew. The overtly political content of the past would be, in Cantwell’s view, simply irrelevant to this new generation’s goal of self-transformation through the collective performance of folk songs and the adoption of alternative lifestyles.

Cantwell gave a convincing account of folk music’s role as a vehicle through which young people could express discontent with mass culture and their parents’ values.
However, because his thesis was based on the malleability of folk culture to suit transitory generational needs, Cantwell may have oversimplified the folk music revival as one generation’s coming-of-age. His starkly disjunctive approach, almost by definition, failed to take into account the continuing role that politics played in an active debate that spanned two generations.

When Dylan arrived in Greenwich Village, he quickly encountered a prominent and highly self-conscious group of pre-war activists that could fairly be called the core “Folk Protest Movement.” As shown by Ronald D. Cohen in his comprehensive study *Rainbow Quest*, these like-minded individuals had long-lasting associations that could often be traced back to the 1940s and their support for the Almanac Singers, “People’s Songs,” and “People’s Artists,” all of which shared political songs and scheduled performances in favor of labor unions, racial equality, and peace (39–66). While the Folk Protest Movement lost much of its organized structure under the pressures of McCarthyism, by 1961 it had clearly re-emerged.1

In the early 1960s, the Folk Protest Movement was initially centered around the magazine *Sing Out!* (a direct successor to a publication of People’s Songs), edited by Irwin Silber (born 1925). In February 1962, it was joined by *Broadside*, a mimeographed periodical for the promotion of original topical songs edited by the husband-and-wife team of former Almanac Singers, Agnes “Sis” Cunningham (born 1909) and Gordon Friesen (also 1909). Other leaders in the Folk Protest Movement included the folklorist Alan Lomax (born 1915), Moses Asch, owner of Folkways Records (born 1905), and Pete Seeger, the proselytizer of “hootenanny” group singing and a co-founder of *Broadside* (born 1919). Starting in 1958, Asch and Seeger would become the financial backers and part-owners of *Sing Out!*, and Asch would later make recordings in partnership with *Broadside*. In addition to their principal occupations, each of these men and women played behind-the-scenes roles in their support of folk music. Their views of music’s role in society provided the background against which many members of a new generation defined their ideas.2

The sociologist R. Serge Denisoff was among those who observed that the majority of protest songs of the 1930s and 1940s differed from those of the next generation. He called the earlier songs “magnetic,” expressing collective feelings of unity and ideological power in a time of general economic depression. By contrast, he believed that the majority of the protest songs of the 1960s, a time of middle-class affluence, were “rhetorical,” expressing individual feelings of formless discontent with particular issues (179–81). With their seeming lack of a specific ideology and a perceived vagueness, the established leaders of the Folk Protest Movement often criticized the younger generation’s political songs. Irwin Silber, for instance, complained that, while contemporary topical singers purported to deal with people’s experiences, they often used abstract words like “Trouble” or “Hard Times,” which amounted to just “froth when you examine it” (“Bob Dylan”).3 However, the more abstract concepts that tended to dominate the songs of the 1960s, including many of Dylan’s songs, may simply have reflected a different worldview that arose with the post-war generation.
The differences between the dominant styles of protest songs in the pre-war and post-McCarthy periods perhaps can be understood best in terms of the contrast between two competing philosophical points of view: an essentially rational and materialistic or orthodox communist-inspired approach, on the one hand, and a more idealistic approach, on the other. The former emphasizes self-evidently practical tools for change and promotes proper social organization, while the latter emphasizes feelings, symbolism, and independent thinking. The differences are also related to the opposing kinds of political action that dissenters of each era proposed. One era offered the organization of militant trade groups (which Denisoff recognized); the other, peaceful change through nonviolent means (which Denisoff did not recognize).

Like Ralph Waldo Emerson in the century before, the best of the newer protest songs (whether “rhetorical” or “magnetic” in style) asked people to examine their consciences, to stand up and be counted, one-by-one, in order to effect positive change, and to imagine a unique kind of wholeness that unites men and women with each other and nature. This paper will argue that Bob Dylan’s early approach in his music to social and political issues can be located within this tradition of American idealism. This Emersonian tradition differed substantially from the outlook of the older leaders of the Folk Protest Movement.

The prolific Dylan critic Michael Gray (75–76) and the English poet Mark Ford have each seen similarities between aspects of Dylan’s work and the ideals espoused by Emerson and his student, Walt Whitman. In addition, Bryan Garman has shown that Whitman’s compassionate views of democracy and equality can be traced through Woody Guthrie to singers of the present day, including Bruce Springsteen and (to a lesser extent) Bob Dylan (“Ghost” 77). None of these studies, however, has compared young Dylan’s beliefs with those of his early political sponsors. Only by viewing his work in this context can one clearly see how Dylan sought to reconcile and adapt his response to the collectivist approach of the Folk Protest Movement, on the one hand, with his strong identification with the individual common man, on the other, resulting in his expressions of American idealism.

The issues with which Dylan struggled also represent themes that can be traced back to the myths and parables upon which this country was founded. As Greil Marcus noted in his pioneering study of rock and roll, *Mystery Train*, a critic can study special artists in terms of how they both draw upon the shared experiences of popular culture and, in turn, change that culture: “Looking back into the corners we might discover whose America we are living in at any moment, and where it came from” (7–8).

**Making Use of the Common Man**

The class-free notion of an unpretentious “common man” has been part of the idea of America since its inception. According to popular myth, common men and women founded the United States with hopes that it would be a “New World,”
untouched by the class-based follies of Western Europe (Hughes 45–65). In 1837, the essayist and public lecturer Ralph Waldo Emerson first observed the need for a uniquely American art and literature that would extol the virtues of democracy and equality. In his celebrated Harvard address, “The American Scholar,” Emerson explained that writers in the United States were too fixed on elitist foreign traditions. “We have listened too long,” he wrote, “to the courtly muses of Europe” (47).

Instead of turning to courtly muses, Emerson argued, American writers should take the whole of their society into account—not just the scholar or the statesman, but the farmer and the menial worker as well. Books, he said, should not be taught blindly in place of common experience. “Colleges and books,” Emerson wrote, “only copy the language which the field and the work-yard made” (39).

The young journalist and burgeoning poet Walt Whitman heard Emerson speak and, duly inspired, wrote the epic poetry collection *Leaves of Grass* largely in direct response. In the preface to its first edition, echoing Emerson, Whitman explained, “[T]he genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures” or even in its “authors or colleges or churches or parlors…but always most in the common people” (5–6).

Like Emerson’s approach to literature, traditional folk songs could be highly regarded if they were taken as symbols of “the people.” Recognizing the relationship of folk music to the ideals of Emerson and Whitman, the folklorist Alan Lomax wrote:

> The common man always has held the center of the stage in our balladry....Long before Whitman, American folk singers rhapsodized the common man in all his dazzling variety...describing him at work and play, and making his passions and problems their main concern.” (Lomax and Lomax ix)

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Alan Lomax and his father John were instrumental in introducing a version of the “common man” to curious society groups and intellectuals, starting in the 1930s. As a direct outcome of their field recordings in the Appalachians and Deep South, the elder Lomax arranged for the folk and blues artists that they had discovered to be put on display and perform, often in costume, in northern urban environments. In his study of the middlemen between authentic folk and popular cultures, Benjamin Filene has described how the Lomaxes’ discoveries were initially presented as romantic vestiges of a rapidly disappearing culture (58–62).

Growing up in the Depression, Alan Lomax, unlike his conservative impresario father, approached the folk music of the disadvantaged as a means to a political end. In a 1981 interview with Ralph Rinzler, Lomax told how, during a field recording that he witnessed when he was only 18, a plantation sharecropper addressed his song of hardship directly to the nation’s president. Lomax said he then realized a use to which such music could be put: “to link the people who were voiceless and who had no way to tell their story, with the big mainstream of world culture” (“Folk Music” 92–93). In giving a voice to those who otherwise were without one, Lomax brought
minorities and the dispossessed (like the ex-convict Lead Belly) into the city, hoping that their voices would be heard by elites in ways to effect positive change (Lieberman 37–8).

Despite Lomax’s best intentions, there was a component of noblesse oblige in his sponsoring of unsophisticated and often illiterate rural folksingers and tutoring them in the political use of their songs. In his opening remarks to a 1950 folklore symposium, Lomax declared himself to be an advocate of “the folk” and then said, “We have to defend them, to interpret them, to interpret to them what is going on in the world” (“Opening Remarks” 116). To illustrate, he then described how, in 1944, he had enlisted the aid of the Grand Ole Opry star Roy Acuff to craft a public service announcement about venereal disease. The announcement was done in a “hillbilly” manner so that, he explained, the unlettered poor could understand it (118). Similarly, in his 1948 forward to The People’s Song Book, Lomax referred to the originators of American folklore as “the little people,” which even his collaborator Irwin Silber recognized was “one of the less fortunate phrases of the time” (qtd. in “Silber” 92).

In addition to giving a voice to an often illiterate people, Lomax found a second reason for promoting folk music. He looked at such music as arising “from the ground up,” emerging out of physical conditions functionally to meet people’s needs. Because, in an oral tradition, “authentic” folk music was passed down through generations (albeit with evolutionary changes), Lomax believed—much like Bronislaw Malinowski and other anthropological “functionalists”—that such music must have embodied lasting and therefore important values (“Opening Remarks” 114–16). Lomax felt, further, that a deeper understanding of the shared values in folk songs could serve to unite cultural groups, even in a modern environment.

Starting in the 1940s, Lomax sought to establish a folk-song canon that he felt could “link the races and the nations into the big family of humanity” (Lomax and Lomax xi). As evidenced by the commentaries to the particular songs that he endorsed, the social and political implications of lyrics were especially important. He declared, for instance, that “America’s greatest ballad” was “John Henry” (Lomax and Lomax 312), a song about a railroad construction worker using his steel-driving hammer to compete against a mechanical drill. In Pete Seeger’s words, the song was originally just a “Paul Bunyon-type extravaganza” (qtd in Dunaway 197). For Lomax, however, the key lines of the ballad occurred when John Henry, a black man, remarked to his supervisor, “A man ain’t nuthin’ but a man” (a refrain for the acceptance of all minority groups, be they racial or national). Then, facing obsolescence in the face of new technology, John Henry refused to stand down. The story thus aroused sympathies across both class and racial lines. In a result-driven analysis and without empirical support, Lomax concluded that the song’s greatness was the result of its being “best-loved” equally by singers “black or white” (Lomax and Lomax 314–15).

As many have observed, an increase in the importance of the political use of folk music resulted from tactics associated with Roosevelt’s New Deal and the Popular Front (e.g. Reuss 17–18, 116–45; Lieberman 38). By 1940, on account of the Popular
Front, the class-based aspirations of communism and the trade union movement were becoming universalized, and the values of "workers" became those of "the people." Largely as a consequence of President Roosevelt’s support through federal works projects and the First Lady’s personal interest, folk music also began to carry with it, as Peter Goldsmith has argued, a set of unspoken presuppositions borrowed from the political left, including the music’s "valorization as the people’s struggle for self-definition in the face of dehumanizing, modernist incursions" (294).

In this context, the 1939 publication and subsequent popularity of John Steinbeck’s novel *The Grapes of Wrath* helped further transform the public’s perception of “the folk” and, indirectly, folk music. The book centered on the Joad family, expropriated Oklahoma farmers who set out during the Great Depression in a dilapidated automobile for California. Facing hardship and near starvation as migrant farm workers, the head of the family, Tom Joad, takes up with Reverend Casy, an ex-preacher who has become a labor organizer. During a confrontation with strike-breaking vigilantes, Casy is killed, but Tom Joad escapes. Tom then promises to carry on Casy’s work in trying to improve the lot of the downtrodden everywhere.

*The Grapes of Wrath* can be read narrowly as a political tract calling for radical change. However, as noted by Warren French, the story of the Joad family can also be viewed more idealistically, as one of overcoming alienation, transforming the Joas from their initial condition of mere self-concern to a condition in which they recognize their spiritual bond with the rest of the human race (94–96, 170). It thus can be read potentially as serving the interests of two different traditions.

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According to Guthrie biographer Joe Klein, the first large-scale recital of “the people’s music” before a mainstream audience, entitled appropriately “A Grapes of Wrath Evening,” took place in the heart of the Broadway Theater District on 3 March 1940 (145). That night, Woody Guthrie, a true Okie dust-bowl refugee, made his New York City debut. Witnessing the performance, Alan Lomax was overwhelmed (Cray 169). Woody was undoubtedly authentic, a common man and a storyteller, but he was, in addition, instinctively political in a way that most other folk singers were not. Fostered by progressive political ideas, Woody joined on-and-off in a phalanx of music-makers, headed by the Almanac Singers, that was encouraged and aggressively promoted by Lomax. As described by Richard Reuss, they set forth to establish a people’s culture that, it was hoped, would be distinctly separate from bourgeois society and commercialism (271–72).

After first recording with Lomax, Guthrie introduced himself to Moses Asch, owner of Folkways Records, with whom he pursued his recording career. Asch, like Lomax, felt a responsibility to document minority voices. His company recorded esoteric materials, including ethnic celebrations and tribal rituals from all over the world. Like Lomax, Asch considered himself a “cultural broker” from whom, in the words of Peter Goldsmith, “social elites developed a particular kind of knowledge
about those less powerful than themselves through their music” (4). As a consequence, the company produced among the most detailed sleeve notes and often sold its records to libraries. According to Anthony Olmstead, Asch saw his role as that of a “documentor” of different cultures (13, 37–38).

As Woody further pursued his career, many participants in the Folk Protest Movement found they were uncomfortable with him. As Silber observed, many “didn’t quite know what to make of this strange bemused poet who drank and bummed and chased after women and spoke in syllables dreadful strange” (qtd in Reuss 138–39). In many ways, Guthrie was a genuine minority voice of the kind that Asch and Lomax admired, but he was also a contradictory figure.

On the one hand, Woody Guthrie was a harsh critic of the rich, a supporter of unions, and, like the other members of the Almanac Singers, a dedicated advocate of proletarian culture. But Guthrie was also a carefree vagabond. He rambled around the country to spend his time with common people, hopping trains and singing his songs day-to-day for a meal. Attraction to one side or the other of Guthrie’s character gave rise to a corresponding divide among those who valued and made use of folk music. The same divide delimited the different intellectual traditions that would come to separate two generations.

A New Generation Feels with “the Folk”

Like Walt Whitman, both Alan Lomax and Woody Guthrie rejected modern measures of man to the extent they were based on elitist, ostentatious display or mere outward appearances. While Lomax, like Asch, went on to champion the virtues of traditional cultures (while documenting their folklore for study), Whitman provided an alternative. He, like Guthrie, chose to extol a vague yet exalted conception of the godlike human spirit. The latter approach helped define American idealism and proved especially appealing to members of the post-war generation.

During his freshman year at the University of Minnesota, young Bob Dylan fell into the orbit of David Whitaker, a “Svengali-like” intellectual maverick whose thoughts had been shaped by Jack Kerouac and other Beat poets. According to Whitaker, folk music then represented the “possibilities of a lifestyle that was different from that ‘gray flannel suit’ of conformity” (39). In the fall of 1960, Whitaker thus recommended that Bob read Woody’s somewhat fictionalized autobiography, Bound for Glory. Dylan devoured it.

Guthrie’s book begins and ends in the present tense, with its author riding the rails in a crowded boxcar with itinerant workers and hobos. In Woody’s idealized vision, the races mix freely in makeshift campsites, brawling and singing, united in their opposition to the rail-yard police, union busters, greedy landowners, and venal politicians. Dylan recently wrote that the book “sang out to me like the radio.” With the author of Bound for Glory, Bob said he’d discovered “a fierce poetic soul” (Chronicles 245). According to his biographer Robert Shelton, Dylan found in Guthrie’s sprawling works a “way of looking at the world” that, among other things,
embraces a “love of people” (79). In sharp contrast to Dylan’s reaction, Gordon Friesen of *Broadside* described *Bound for Glory* in the narrowest of political terms. In a July 1962 article, he described it as a “very tragic story” with the underlying message: “[F]or God’s sake do something to change things so that human beings won’t have to go through the same suffering over and over again” (Friesen and Cunningham).  

Friesen and Dylan seem to have read two different books. One of the most pivotal scenes in *Bound for Glory* finds Guthrie waiting for an audition in the prestigious Rainbow Room high atop Rockefeller Center. He described himself thinking how much he preferred performing for union workers and soldiers, “cause singing with them made me friends with them, an’ I felt like somehow I was in on their work” (389–90). In *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman had used the word “adhesiveness,” originally a phrenologist’s term for the faculty of forming personal attachments, to describe similar feelings of kinship with all kinds of people (274, “Calamus”; 301, “Song of the Open Road”).

In Whitman’s work, the concept of adhesion was originally predicated on homosexual relations among men, but, as Bryan Garman has shown, it can be usefully extended to apply generally to an idealistic tradition of class politics that emphasizes social equality based on compassion (Race 9). Similarly, the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg described the concept and its history in economic and class contexts, not exclusively in sexual terms. He expressed his belief that adhesion had been eliminated from American life since Whitman’s day by the subsequent development of a “competitive macho capitalist selfish ethic” (84).

Dylan—like Whitman, Guthrie, and Ginsberg—exhibited feelings of adhesiveness with the downtrodden. In the small blue-collar community where he grew up, Dylan was drawn to those who suffered or had less than he did. Perhaps in reaction against his family’s role in financing (and sometimes repossessing) the purchase of large appliances in an unstable mining town (Scaduto 23), Bob was always attracted to the values and simple pleasures of those largely without material things. Dylan’s closest friends in high school, John Bucklen and Echo Helstrom, were either dirt-poor or came from the “wrong side” of the tracks (Shelton 40–41).

Echo recalled Dylan’s delight at the discovery of John Steinbeck’s raucous and bawdy novella, *Cannery Row*, at the age of 17 (Scaduto 22). A second Steinbeck favorite from those years was *The Grapes of Wrath* (Sounes 38). In selecting the topic for a lengthy high school essay, Dylan chose, “Does John Steinbeck Sympathize with his Characters?” Upon discovering Woody Guthrie, Bob quickly mastered his song, “Tom Joad” (Shelton 77), and he has since named that song as among those that influenced him most (Scott Cohen 11). Since there is little remarkable musically about Guthrie’s song, its sympathetic portrayal of Depression-era itinerant workers would seem to be the basis of its appeal.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the characters mature through achieving empathy with others, including those who may be less fortunate. In Steinbeck’s novel, to escape the hypocrisy of organized religion, Reverend Casy had given up preaching in order to learn from honest, but unlettered workers. In abandoning the church, Casy indicated
his preference for people with raw, soulful instincts over supposedly more civilized values. Like Emerson and Whitman, Reverend Casy chose to abandon book-learning and rarefied culture in order to observe and learn directly from the “common man,” the migrant farm workers. His exposure to “the folk” would be unmediated. Unlike Alan Lomax or Moe Asch, Casy would not give instructions, document, or objectively study the people’s folklore. As Casy explained:

I ain’t gonna baptize. I’m gonna work in the fiel’s, in the green fiel’, and I’m gonna be near to folks. I ain’t gonna try to teach ’em nothin’. I’m gonna try to learn. Gonna learn why the folks walks in the grass, gonna hear ’em talk, gonna hear ’em sing….Gonna eat with ’em an’ learn. (Steinbeck 96, ch. 10)

Near the end of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Tom Joad observed contrasting images of the abundance of the privileged few and the privation of the numerous poor. After seeing people living like animals, he then confessed to his Ma how he was thinking about “the good rich lan’ layin’ fallow, or maybe one fella with a million acres, while a hunderd thousan’ good farmers is starvin’” (435, ch. 28).

The influence of Steinbeck’s novel is perhaps most apparent in Dylan’s anthem, “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall.” In that song, Dylan, like Tom Joad, sees that the world is not right. He sings of a “highway of diamonds with nobody on it” and says that he heard “one person starve” and many people laughing (Lyrics 59). In “Hard Rain,” such conflicts must be resolved or they will end with either nuclear fallout (a kind of “hard rain”) or, more likely, a repeat of God’s wrath represented by Noah’s flood (the real “hard rain”).

After hearing and seeing too much injustice, Dylan seeks to identify with the common man in the same way that Reverend Casy did. Dylan declares near the end of “Hard Rain” that he’s “a-goin’ back out ’fore the rain starts a-fallin’.” He will learn his song well, before he starts singing. He says where he will go to learn his lessons: “I’ll walk to the depths of the deepest black forest,/Where the people are many and their hands are all empty.” Before he spreads the words to cause change, Bob is going out to learn from the rough and less fortunate elements of society (Lyrics 60). Like Reverend Casy, Dylan wants to be close to “the people.” Like Emerson and Whitman, he wants to learn from “the folk” and feel the basic emotions they feel.

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In 1961, when Bob Dylan first reached Greenwich Village, Alan Lomax had returned to New York after eight years in England and was again promoting folk music by effecting introductions, helping with bookings, and providing intellectual guidance (Lieberman 37–38). With the 1962 publication in the journal *Ethnology* of his essay “Song Structure and Social Structure,” Lomax had also begun his systematic classification of primitive musical cultures based on their dominant vocal techniques, the extent of group participation, and the social background of their practitioners. His assistants included Carla Rotolo, an Italian-American who lived in Greenwich Village with her younger sister, a 17-year-old honey-blonde girl, Suze (pronounced
“Suzie”). Suze and Carla were regulars in the clubs and cafés that featured singers of the kind that Alan, with his father John, had first “discovered” and brought back to New York. By the summer of 1961, six months after his Minnesota departure, Bob had met and fallen in love with Suze.

Dylan spent hours in Alan Lomax’s apartment learning new songs by poring through vinyl and taped field recordings (Sounes 95). Alan and Bob clearly shared an admiration for the values of the common man, as a means to supplement or correct the many shortcomings of contemporary mass culture. They both agreed that important values were those that were “real” (meaning “basic” or “fundamental”) in a way that superficial Madison Avenue advertising was not. They both opposed the accumulation of material things. However, Lomax and other leaders of the Folk Protest Movement differed with Dylan in their beliefs about how one should make use of folk music. This is evident in their different approaches to the so-called “Country Blues.”

The term “Country Blues” is taken from the seminal 1959 study of the same name by Samuel B. Charters, a close associate and talent scout for Moe Asch. Although there was, and remains, some controversy over Charters’ classification of individual musicians, his term remains useful because it influenced participants in the folk music revival (Titon 222–24). As described by Charters, the term indicates a form of intensely personal musical expression that originated with African Americans in the Deep South in the 1920s (19). The Country Blues were raw, acoustic and primitive. Its first practitioners included, among others, Blind Lemon Jefferson and Bukka White, performers whose songs Dylan covered on his first album, simply titled *Bob Dylan*.

Two critical interpreters of the folk music revival, Jon Pankake and Paul Nelson, were early friends and advisors of Bob Dylan at the University of Minnesota. In 1960, they founded the small folk music “fanzine” *The Little Sandy Review*. In it, they argued that, when the Country Blues were played or sung by a white urban performer, it was the style and feeling that mattered most. In their early review of *Bob Dylan*, they focused, therefore, on Dylan’s “great emotional depth” (60–61). By elevating the experience of subjective feelings, issues concerning the social context of the original song (a more objective measure, favored by Lomax) were largely rendered irrelevant. By contrast, together with the Scottish folklorist Ewan MacColl (qtd in Silber, “Ewan MacColl” 9), Lomax generally resisted the usurpation by one nationality or ethnic group of the traditional songs that belonged to another.

Paul Nelson explained the younger generation’s position on the sleeve notes to *The Blues Project—Various Artists*, a 1964 “sampler” album of white urban blues singers on which Dylan briefly appeared. Nelson argued that an awareness of the social or political context of the Country Blues could actually be an obstacle to the unfiltered experience of the music’s underlying emotions. In this way, urban white performers and white audiences could learn from the crude and often painful raw power of the Country Blues in ways that young blacks could not. Young blacks, he said, weren’t interested in such songs, as they could not escape from their unpleasant connotations of the “pre-freedom-bound Negro.”
Gordon Friesen of *Broadside* approached the Country Blues from a diametrically opposite viewpoint. He argued that the “verbal content” as sung by the original, authentic performers was their most important feature, not their rhythmic or emotional appeal. The “harsh magic” of the blues (which, one can infer, was the feature that most attracted Pankake and Nelson) was simply designed, according to Friesen, to attract listeners to hear the singer’s substantive message, which was inevitably “a protest against an intolerable status quo” (“Whither Folk Music”). The performance of raw, primitive blues by white folksingers led regrettably, said Friesen, to the devaluation of the political content and social context in favor of either instrumental techniques or merely the pursuit of “kicks.”

Clearly, folk music (including the Country Blues) could be used in ways to serve either individual emotional needs, on the one hand, or more readily definable group social and political objectives, on the other. For a time, Dylan sought to balance the two. In January 1962, with the encouragement of his girlfriend Suze, Dylan began to write his finger-pointing songs, with lyrics aimed at identifying particular instances of injustice. He was recruited at once as a contributor for the first issue of *Broadside*, published in the following month. In attempting to serve political causes while preserving his sense of the importance of each individual’s feelings, Dylan found himself working squarely within the Emersonian tradition of American idealism.

**Dylan’s Rhetoric and Magnetism**

Denisoff called the dominant type of protest song of the 1960s “rhetorical” (179). Songs of this type often featured complex narratives that, like Dylan’s first efforts, may not have had a chorus at all. By telling an educational story, rhetorical songs drew attention to a single incident or political issue. While songs from the 1930s required “magnetic” songs to mobilize union organization and strike activities, the paradigm for the activism of the later period was the ideal of civil disobedience espoused by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. As a member of the post-war generation, Joan Baez had publicly embraced such ideals, describing Gandhi and King as the “saints” of radical nonviolence, which, in her words, had “won my heart when I was barely sixteen” (103).

The concept of civil disobedience can be traced back to Emerson and his eccentric disciple, Henry David Thoreau. Emerson and Thoreau maintained that the source of all value was the uniqueness of the individual and his or her conscience. As a consequence, they avoided institutional political methods, which can suppress individualism and which, moreover, may be corrupted. Instead, they and their followers urged a kind of all-loving, passive resistance that, through willing self-sacrifice, created a powerful moral example for others.

In his rhetorical songs, like Emerson and Thoreau, Dylan focused on the need for people to consider injustice by examining their consciences. His first such song, “The Death of Emmett Till,” described the 1955 brutal murder by members of the Ku Klux Klan of a young black man visiting relatives in the South. In the song’s
overly simplistic conclusion, Dylan concluded that, if you can’t speak out against such a crime, then you might as well be dead: “Your eyes are filled with dead men’s dirt…and your blood it must refuse to flow,/For you to let this human race fall down so God-awful low!” (Lyrics 19).

In subsequent efforts, Dylan would become subtler, but he continued to require his audience to look critically within themselves. As an example, in “Who Killed Davey Moore?”, Dylan demonstrated that the featherweight boxer of the song’s title was not really killed by his opponent Sugar Ramos in March of 1963 or by the referee who didn’t stop the championship fight. Rather, the fighter was killed by all of us, the spectators, because of our lust for the dangerous sport.

Dylan’s early rhetorical songs were especially effective when they focused upon the feelings of their frequently misunderstood central characters. In “The Ballad of Hollis Brown,” for instance, the singer enters the mind of an unemployed husband and father of a forsaken rural household. Dylan describes the man’s last desperate thoughts before he takes his and all of his family’s lives. In “Hollis Brown”—as in “Ballad of Donald White” (about a condemned prisoner) and “John Brown” (a maimed soldier)—it’s the lead character’s felt experience, and not the need for a responsive action by a political group, that most attracted Dylan’s attention. Wholly apart from correcting social injustices, Dylan wants to excite “adhesiveness” and provoke honest feelings among his listeners.

Besides awakening the conscience of his listeners, Dylan’s finger-pointing songs often criticized, at least implicitly, his political allies. As an example, in “With God on Our Side,” with his listeners’ tacit approval, Dylan first ridicules the false and pompous self-righteousness displayed by the nation’s forebears as the justification for their wars, from the slaughter of Indians through the Second World War (as actions all taken “with God on our side”). Then Dylan turns to the present day and the Cold War propaganda intended to inspire a passionate hatred of the Russians. Our forebears were arrogant and foolish, the singer explains, but we are no different. At the end of the song, frustrated by so-called civilized values, Dylan walks away: “So now as I’m leavin’/I’m weary as Hell/The confusion I’m feelin’/Ain’t no tongue can tell” (Lyrics 86). With such remarks, Dylan sounds like Thoreau who, for similar reasons, often chose to live with nature instead of with man.

In a second example, “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” Dylan naturally assumes his audience will want to cry for an unjustly killed maid, but he repeatedly tells them not to do so. The revelation of the true injustice (the upper-class killer’s mere six-month sentence) eventually provides the real reason to cry. Apart from this conclusion, however, “Hattie Carroll” is particularly remarkable because of Dylan’s accusatory attitude toward people who would distance themselves emotionally from the maid’s death.

In “Hattie Carroll,” Dylan contemptuously calls out those of his listeners who might attempt to explain or justify the murderous behavior of William Zanzinger (those who “philosophize disgrace,” as Dylan puts it). Liberals who provide socially acceptable responses to problems, such as telling people not to be afraid of things
they don’t understand (“criticize all fears”), are frequently wrong: “[Y]ou who philosophize disgrace and criticize all fears/ Take the rag away from your face,/ Now ain’t the time for your tears” (Lyrics 95). In the end, it’s not just the light sentence that offends Dylan; it’s his listeners’ smug and intellectualized responses as well (complete with manufactured tears). With their predictable, knee-jerk responses, Dylan feels that his liberal audience members are incapable of achieving “adhension” or expressing genuine sorrow and outrage.

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Questions concerning the “one” and the “many” have long dominated American thought. With a diverse ethnic and religious population, some uniting force, like a shared moral system or civic religion, has seemed necessary to prevent conflict and promote cooperation. In establishing America, the nation’s founding fathers appealed to deism and the concept of “Nature” (Hughes 56). By contrast, the leaders of the Folk Protest Movement looked to various reason-based political reforms, such as socialism, to prevent further class conflict and thus achieve the “one” from the “many.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson also struggled with the concept of the “one and the many.” A lapsed Unitarian minister, he (like the founding fathers) sought to articulate a system of beliefs that would not be God-centered. His answer was transcendentalism, a uniquely American form of idealism, defined in part by the idea that each man and woman participates in a single overarching “over-soul.” According to Emerson, all people have access to this over-soul by utilizing their insight and intuition. Feelings of adhesion with others could be explained in terms of the common soul that all people shared. The notion of the over-soul could also be perceived in nature; properly understood, nature and the human mind mirror each other perfectly.

*The Grapes of Wrath*, besides depicting the adhesion that Casy feels for the common man, also illustrates the significance of the over-soul. Steinbeck stressed that all men are a part of one another and also part of a greater whole that transcends ordinary reality. Preacher Casy thus mused, “maybe that’s the Holy Sperit—the human sperit—the whole shebang. Maybe all men got one big soul ever’body’s a part of it” (24, ch. 4). Although Steinbeck apparently did not derive his ideas directly from Emerson, his belief in a kind of holistic interdependency of men on each other originated from similar sources (Benson 233–50).

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On 26 July 1963, at the end of the first evening’s concert of that year’s Newport Folk Festival, Bob Dylan joined Pete Seeger, Theo Bikel, Joan Baez, Peter Paul and Mary, and the Freedom Singers on stage simultaneously. They stood with crossed black and white arms, their hands linked together as one, and sang Peter Paul and Mary’s hit song of that summer, “Blowin’ in the Wind.” As a symbolic image of racial harmony, the singing of Dylan’s most magnetic song represented perfectly that fundamental
aspirational myth of both American history and the Folk Protest Movement: “out of the many, one” (“E Pluribus Unum”).

The presence of Pete Seeger, once a zealous Almanac Singer, is illustrative of the rise of Emersonian idealism in the years following World War II. As Robert Lumer has shown, after the war, Seeger began to use metaphors increasingly in the manner of Gandhi and King in an effort to show through his lyrics how love binds all people together (54). With songs like “Where Have All the Flowers Gone” and “Guantanamera,” Seeger thus made himself more relevant to a new generation than he would have been using narrower themes, such as that of “Union Maid,” as he had done as an Almanac Singer.

With “Blowin’ in the Wind,” Dylan asks a series of open-ended questions about how long it will take for broadly defined social changes to occur, such as civil rights and disarmament. Some, like Dave Van Ronk, regarded Dylan’s pat reply to the many questions he asked as vague and unsatisfactory (Sounes 114–15). In a 1962 article, Dylan responded by analogizing his song’s “answer” to a piece of paper blowing restlessly, like a newspaper down a deserted street that has to come down eventually (“Letter” 7).

Despite Dylan’s explanation, the phrase “blowin’ in the wind” appears to mean more than just change may come eventually. Dylan’s phrasing implies a teleological view of history; that is, civilization is moving purposefully towards a particular goal. However, unlike the theoretical inevitability of a Marxist-styled revolution with rules that one could articulate, the changes that Dylan foresees are discernible only through one’s intuition. Special knowledge of the natural inevitability of change would connect the sensibility of Dylan’s song with the kind of access to a universal spirit or over-soul that informed Emerson’s philosophy.

John Steinbeck made similar use of the blowing wind near the end of The Grapes of Wrath. Outside a labor camp at night, Tom Joad explained to his Ma some of the things that Reverend Casy had taught him about the “have’s” and “have-not’s” and what it will take to cause positive change. As he talks, Ma interrupts him repeatedly with the words, “Hush—listen!” Tom replies, each time, “On’y the wind, Ma. I know the wind” (435, ch. 28). Joad’s description of a positive future is thus accompanied by images of the blowing wind. His use of the wind is exactly the same as in Dylan’s song.

Dylan’s 1963 prose poem, “Last Thoughts on Woody Guthrie,” also illustrates how his view of nature is similar to Emerson’s. In it, Dylan first lists the many disappointments that life brings, and he struggles to articulate what he needs in response. In the end, he concludes, there are two choices. In looking for hope and a reason to live, you can either go find God in the church of your choice or you can go to Brooklyn State Hospital where you’ll find Woody Guthrie. Significantly, the spirits of both God and Woody reside in places of natural wonder: “And though it’s only my opinion/I may be right or wrong/You’ll find them both/In the Grand Canyon/At sundown” (Writings 56).

Like the transcendentalists, Dylan wrote that all thoughts can be traced back to nature, the reflection of a perfect mind. In “11 Outlined Epitaphs” (the album notes
to his third album, *The Times They Are A-Changin’*), he wrote, “[l]nfluences?/hundreds thousands/perhaps millions/for all songs lead back t’ the sea/an’ at one time, there was no singin’ tongue t’imitate it” (*Writings* 112). In much the same way, in “Lay Down Your Weary Tune,” Bob acknowledged the superiority of the natural world to any music that he, a mere mortal, could make. Like Wordsworth at the turning point in Book VI of his romantic epic *The Prelude*, Dylan’s quest for meaning is answered in nature. His human efforts pale in its presence: “I gazed down in the river’s mirror/And watched its winding strum/… [R]est yourself ’neath the strength of strings/No voice can hope to hum” (*Lyrics* 104). Finally, in “When the Ship Comes In,” Dylan described nature celebrating the ultimate victory of its own inherent laws, such as freedom, justice and equality. Perhaps alluding to the civil rights movement, he used the metaphor of a ship’s long-awaited arrival: “Oh the fishes will laugh/As they swim out of the path/And the seagulls they’ll be smiling/…The hour that the ship comes in” (*Lyrics* 93).11

* * *

Both the vagueness and visionary components of Dylan’s use of nature are typical of American idealism. Emerson himself was felt by many during his lifetime to be diffuse and without a discernible method (Menand 17–18). And the writings of Woody Guthrie, in many ways Dylan’s closest mentor, suffered like Emerson’s from vagueness. Thus, *Bound for Glory* culminates in a kind of dreamy utopian consciousness consisting of a life-affirming, mysterious bond that unites vagrants with each other and the forces of the natural world. In a climactic scene (which, significantly, features another “blowing wind”), Guthrie describes men in a boxcar singing as a storm rages outside: “Rain on, little rain, rain on!/Blow on, little wind, keep blowin’! ’Cause them guys is a singin’ that this train is bound for glory, an’ I’m gonna hug her breast till I find out where she’s bound” (34).

Virtually all of Guthrie’s writings about travel, nature, and his fellow man have a mystical, idealist component. As a self-taught youth, Woody once earned his money from telling fortunes and giving advice under the spell of the spiritual writer Kahlil Gibran, author of the best-selling collection of fables *The Prophet* (Klein 66–70). Gibran’s influence may never have left the dust-bowl balladeer. Like Whitman, whom Gibran studied (Waterfield 41–44), the Lebanese poet elevated common things, including ordinary people, while asserting the interconnectedness of the high and the low: “[A]ll things, from the lowest to the loftiest,” he wrote, “from the smallest to the greatest, are within you as equal. In…one aspect of you are found all the aspects of existence” (867).

In a 1968 interview with John Cohen of *Sing Out!*, Dylan admitted that he, like Guthrie, had been directly influenced by Gibran (Cohen and Traum 10). Young Dylan was thus susceptible to his brand of romantic haziness, particularly in his prose writings. In “11 Outlined Epitaphs,” Dylan described a conversation while driving through New Jersey at night. He says he’s happy “cause I’m calmly lookin’ outside an’ watchin’ the night unwind.” When asked what he meant, Dylan replied, “I mean
somethin’ like there’s no end t’ it and it’s so big/that every time I see it it’s like seein’ for the first time” (Writings 104).

Learning from the Folk Directly

Leaders of the Folk Protest Movement viewed folk singers as “men of the people” whose outlook should reflect that of their listeners. As a community’s designated propagator of its shared heritage, according to Lomax, the folk singer literally is “of his audience” (“America” 91). As a man of the people, it followed that a folk singer had to experience the feelings that lie behind his art (Denisoff 159). And yet, as late as mid-1963, despite his growing role as a spokesman, Dylan had never been to the South. He was thus urged to travel in order to witness the civil rights movement first-hand. In early July, he joined Theo Bikel and Pete Seeger for several days at a voter registration drive in Greenwood, Mississippi.

In the spring and summer of 1963, President Kennedy had come to favor voter registration drives over more dangerous forms of civil rights protest, such as using privately chartered buses in so-called “Freedom Rides” to force the integration of interstate bus terminals. In a strategic compromise, the leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) agreed. However, Kennedy had not been as supportive of the registration drives as at first had been hoped. With Kennedy’s failure to support even his own compromise, the political process was seen as corrupt.

While at Greenwood, Dylan debuted “Only a Pawn in Their Game,” one of his last protest songs. It is an imagined account of the kind of man that would have killed Medgar Evers, the Mississippi field secretary of the NAACP gunned down only a month before in front of his house by a shot in the back. As in his earlier topical songs, Dylan focused on the neglected feelings of a central misunderstood character. The song’s villains are political leaders and members of law enforcement who spread bigotry throughout the South for personal gain. In responding to a culture of racial hatred, the poor Southern whites don’t think about their own meager conditions. It does not occur to them to challenge authorities on their own behalf. So the killing is not the fault of the impoverished white shooter: “he’s only a pawn in their game.”

With “Only a Pawn,” Dylan declared that leadership is not to be trusted. A similar distrust of authority was a major focus of Emerson’s thought. In fact, his distrust of the leaders of organized religion was the principal source of his emphasis on each individual’s exercise of his or her independent judgment. Don’t be a pawn in some larger game.

Like Reverend Casy among the farm workers, Dylan paid close attention to his surroundings in Greenwood. He was learning first-hand how the oppressed thought and felt. Dylan identified with “the folk,” like Jim Forman, the Secretary of SNCC, and Bernice Johnson of SNCC’s Freedom Singers. In “11 Outlined Epitaphs,” written in late 1963, he wrote of his experiences: “Jim, Jim/where is our party?/
where is the party that’s one/where all members’re held equal/an’ vow t’infiltrate that thought/among the people it hopes t’serve” (Writings 109).

Just six weeks after singing at Greenwood, Bob Dylan was in the nation’s capital, attending the Kennedy-endorsed, politically expedient March on Washington. For a few moments, he and Joan Baez sang together before a gathering audience of thousands. They also sang in separate duets with two black performers, Len Chandler and Odetta. On the surface, the symbolic display of black and white singers performing together was a replay of the ceremonial encore from earlier that summer at Newport. At the same time, civil rights leaders such as Malcolm X and John Lewis, Chairman of SNCC, now saw that they had been betrayed by the Kennedy administration and that, by supporting voter registration drives and the March on Washington, they had compromised their goals (Zinn 458). From the day of the March on Washington forward, as attendee Dick Gregory noted, singers symbolizing young whites, such as Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, would be welcome to “stand behind,” but no longer to “stand in front of” the black leaders of the civil rights movement (qtd in Hadju 183). It no longer seemed as possible, in the manner of Pete Seeger, to sing the blues, mountain music, Scottish ballads, and African lullabies in one style to demonstrate that men and women all over the world were the same.  

On 22 November 1963, President Kennedy was assassinated. The following month, Dylan was called upon to speak at a fashionable fund raiser for the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee (ECLC) as the recipient of its Tom Paine Award. As Dylan looked down from the dais of the Grand Ballroom of the Americana Hotel, he saw black and white faces in formal attire. The wealthy patrons of the ECLC, although doubtless well-meaning consumers of Folkways Records, were not the “common men” whose virtues Emerson, Whitman, and Guthrie had praised. In a replay of Woody Guthrie’s reaction to the patrons of the Rainbow Room, Dylan found that he, too, couldn’t relate to his audience. He alluded, instead, to the black Americans he knew personally and those he’d just met in Mississippi. He related to them as friends and individuals. He did not, however, feel the same kind of “adhesion” to well-to-do groups identified to him only by their political labels.

In explaining his views, Dylan referred to the people “making my rules” (perhaps his sponsors in the Folk Protest Movement) and how “they talk about Negroes, and they talk about black and white.” He then complained, “I don’t see any colors at all…I’ve read history books, I’ve never seen one history book that tells how anybody feels” (Shelton 222–23). Like Emerson, Dylan was rejecting book-learning in favor of experience.

In a follow-up letter, sounding again like Reverend Casy, Dylan wrote of minorities generally, “[N]obody tells me how any of ’m cries or laughs or kisses….I want now t see an know for myself ” (Bob Dylan 7). As in his best rhetorical songs, Dylan was focused on people’s emotions. As in “Hattie Carroll,” he also seemed to believe that his ECLC audience had intellectualized their commitment without having true
feelings. They were too far removed from contact with the real people—the common men and women, “the folk”—whom they were trying to help.

* * *

In February 1964, Dylan and three friends undertook a cross-country journey in a packed station wagon, re-enacting the adventures of either Woody Guthrie or Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*. In promoting the trip, Dylan talked up the idea of meeting real people (Scaduto 164). During the long drive, Dylan composed the last of his early protest songs, “Chimes of Freedom.” That song, like “Blowin’ in the Wind” and the prose poem “Last Thoughts,” was a visionary piece that evoked the natural world. Like Thoreau, whose radical independent views led him to live alone on Walden Pond, Dylan found that, in addition to “the folk,” he needed to listen more closely to nature.

In “Chimes of Freedom,” Dylan imaginatively placed members of nonviolent civil rights organizations (like SNCC, the “warriors whose strength is not to fight”) alongside images of a larger class of dispossessed and confused people. Such people, one could easily imagine, might include the migrant farm workers from *The Grapes of Wrath*, the institutionalized patients from Allen Ginsberg’s poem “Howl,” and even members of the ECLC: the “confused, accused, misused, strung-out ones and worse/An every hung-up person in the whole wide universe” (*Lyrics* 116). He placed all of them, in turn, alongside images of striking bolts of lightning.

In “Chimes of Freedom,” Dylan used lightning in somewhat the same way that he had used the blowing wind in his earlier classic, as a presage of freedoms to come. But in Bob’s lexicon, the notion of “freedom” could no longer be reduced to a series of causes, like voter registration or even civil rights reform. It meant, instead, a liberation of spirit felt in a blast like a Zen Buddhist’s satori: “Through the mad mystic hammering of the wild ripping hail/The sky cracked its poems in naked wonder/…An’ we gazed upon the chimes of freedom flashing” (*Lyrics* 116). Following Kennedy’s assassination, nature is not conceptualized as a steady wind that causes branches to bend or mountains slowly to wear down to the sea. Instead, lightning causes change suddenly, striking like an angered snake.

The inspiration for “Chimes of Freedom” could well have been a passage in *Bound for Glory* in which Guthrie described a fight that broke out in a railroad boxcar as the result of a racial slur. The narrative culminates, as does Dylan’s song, with bolts of lightning, personified like an untamed Greek god. Like the men in the boxcar, the lightning picks fights and, somewhat oddly, falls prey like Dionysus to excesses of women and wine:

Men fighting against men….Race pushing against race. And all of us battling against the wind and rain and that bright crackling lightning the booms and zooms, that bathes his eyes in the white sky, wrestles a river to a standstill, and spends the night drunk in a whorehouse….The cloudbursts got madder and splashed through all of the lakes, laughing and singing, and then a wail in the wind would get a low start and cry in the timber like the cry for freedom of a conquered people. (32)
Beneath all the human chaos, Guthrie senses something important emerging from the natural world, just as Emerson and Whitman had before him and Dylan would afterward. The rhythms of mankind’s struggle are part of a larger order, reflected in nature and culminating with a sense of freedom. In *Bound for Glory*, Woody then wonders, “Who am I?” and “What am I supposed to do here?” He says he doesn’t know, but he trusts nature like he would a transcendent god. Guthrie concludes that he’ll hang onto that train until he finds out where it’s bound, which, of course, constitutes the book’s title.

Guthrie had read and admired Walt Whitman’s poetry (Werner 70), and he doubtless borrowed the image of lightning from that poet’s preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. In it, Whitman urged all men and women to elevate their consciousness of the supreme powers within them, to understand and embrace the grand as well as the fearful with a god-like perspective, as part of themselves. Whitman wrote:

> What do you think is the grandeur of storms and…the wildest fury of the elements and the power of the sea and the motion of nature and of the throes of human desires and dignity and hate and love? It is that something in the soul which says, Rage on, Whirl on, I tread master here and everywhere, Master of the spasms of the sky and of the shatter of the sea, Master of nature and passion and death, And of all terror and all pain. (14–15)

Dylan’s “Chimes of Freedom,” like Woody’s autobiography and Whitman’s Preface, is wrapped in notions of mystical glory. The reality depicted in each work is not merely a material world, part of a rational order based on cause-and-effect. It is, in addition, a transcendent world informed by symbols where opposites are reconciled.

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There would always be an inherent conflict between viewing the singer-songwriter as a man-of-the-people, on the one hand, and as an exceptional poet or visionary, on the other. Emerson’s 1842 essay “The Poet” represents an attempt to balance that conflict, based on his notion that all mankind shares in one soul. According to Emerson, a poet or songwriter displays a heightened understanding of the world. Through intuition, he achieves a sense of transcendence and then returns among men so that, like a teacher, he can share his visions with like-minded souls. “The poet,” wrote Emerson, “is representative. He stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the common wealth” (248).

However, the poet may find, as Dylan did, that it’s hard to share visions with men and women who, on account of different concerns or fixed ideas, are not prepared to receive them. Such was the case with the leaders of the Folk Protest Movement. They had chosen to focus on the creation and maintenance of a “people’s music” to enhance group unity and serve what they believed would be a new classless proletarian culture. This choice was made, however, at the expense of recognizing independence, diversity, and the value of individual expression.
By the end of 1964, Irwin Silber would accuse Dylan of being “inner-probing, self-conscious—maybe even a little maudlin” instead of dealing more “honestly with reality” through his writing of protest songs like before (“Open Letter” 67). The Scottish folklorist and political activist Ewan MacColl was especially critical of Dylan’s more symbolic lyrics, which MacColl called “embarrassing fourth-grade schoolboy attempts” at free verse. He said that they reminded him of “elderly female schoolteachers clad in Greek tunics rolling hoops across lawns at weekend theatre schools” (13).

In Woody Guthrie’s “Tom Joad,” once among Dylan’s favorites, the lead character sang: “Ever’body might be just one big soul/Well it looks that a way to me./ Everywhere that you look in the day or night/That’s where I’m gonna be, Ma,/That’s where I’m gonna be.” By 1964, Dylan was leaving that view behind. In the fall of that year, Bob Dylan began writing his novel *Tarantula*, which was substantially complete by the following spring (Heylin 195). In it, as eventually published in 1971, Dylan set forth a revealing dialogue between himself and a fictional character, presumably Joan Baez. Calling Joan “mother” (his *de facto* sponsor in the Folk Protest Movement), Bob reveals, like Tom Joad, where he’s going to be. Unlike Tom Joad, however, Dylan’s no longer going to be all things to all people, part of one universal soul. He’s headed in his own direction:

mother say go in That direction & please do the greatest deed of all time & I say mother but it’s already been done...I’m not going in That direction—I’m going in that direction & she say ok but where will you be & I say I don’t know mother but I’m not tom joad & she say all right then I am not your mother (120).

One of the principal traits of Dylan’s mature rhetorical songs was his implied challenge to received wisdom of all kinds. As a consequence, the critical linchpin holding Dylan’s thought-system together would have to be self-reliance. The same concept was the centerpiece of Emerson’s philosophy: it was the title of perhaps his most famous essay. Self-reliance, however, is a highly paradoxical concept. As noted by Louis Menand, the “self” is left, like a propped-up matchstick, to lean against…what? What is the “I” that is being urged to rely on this “self” (18)?

Emerson recognized the problem. In his essay “Experience,” he confronted an isolated, inner world imprisoned by subjectivity and relativism, a world in which “dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion” (271). Nonetheless, the philosopher bravely chose to push on, however lonely that sometimes might seem. Bob Dylan, again like Emerson, would begin to explore the self at the outer limits of thought. With songs ranging from “It’s Alright Ma (I’m Only Bleeding)” to “Just like Tom Thumb’s Blues,” Dylan, like Emerson, would maintain that, even amidst despair, life is defined by the self and moves on. Acknowledging Dylan’s shifting concerns, Irwin Silber would accuse him, not inaccurately, of having betrayed his politically conscious self to become, instead, a dreaded existentialist (“Topical Song” 67).

Despite the abandonment of overtly political lyrics, Dylan’s more introspective songs would continue to investigate themes and approach issues in ways consistent with the idealism of his early protest songs. His subsequent signature pieces, like “Mr.
Tambourine Man” and “Visions of Johanna,” would represent further attempts to capture and sustain a kind of transcendentalist’s vision, though the vision was solitary, not shared. Even his breakthrough song, “Like a Rolling Stone,” would display his continuing concern with people’s emotions. In it, he would implore a fallen debutante to experience life by addressing head-on life’s most basic issue: “How does it feel?”

Reflecting the values that he’d learned from “the folk,” the singer-songwriter would continue to believe that life’s validation comes, not from social status or political affiliation, but rather from the direct experience of fundamental emotions. Largely absent from the sectarian objectives of the Folk Protest Movement, Bob Dylan had found the emotions he valued in the works of Steinbeck, Guthrie, and the Country Blues. With their emphasis on the emotional integrity of the common man, such works shaped Dylan’s early views of folk music, as well as the content of his protest songs. As part of an established pattern of American idealism, such works helped Dylan, at least for a time, envision the unity of mankind while maintaining respect for the feelings of each individual.

Notes

[1] Some of those directly involved in what I have called the “Folk Protest Movement,” such as Irwin Silber, have proposed that their group should be recognized, if at all, on account of their having a shared “moral core” of beliefs (“Irwin Silber” 91). Sam Charters suggested, similarly, that the term “social moralists” be used for those who promoted certain kinds of folk music, emphasizing their common concern for racial equality, ethnic self-determination, and world peace (Goldsmith 8). In his introduction to a survey of folk music revivals, Neil Rosenberg considered the circumstances under which use of the term “movement” was appropriate. Unlike more general words (including “revival”), he concluded that the term “movement” evoked the notion of a commitment to political action (18). I have used the word in this sense in order to identify what Robbie Lieberman called “the movement culture of the Old Left”; that is, the beliefs of particular men and women who sought to use music for political purposes at a particular time and place (xv).

[2] Some prominent figures in the folk music revival were not as central to the narrower Folk Protest Movement. For instance, the role of Israel “Izzy” Young, who founded the Folklore Music Center and later wrote a gossip column for Sing Out!, was largely that of an enthusiastic promoter. He regularly disclaimed association with any overtly political movement. See Young (91). Moe Asch, too, disclaimed political affiliations, but, as Peter Goldsmith has argued, Asch’s active involvement in progressive causes largely belied such a disclaimer (4, 8).

[3] The vagueness in the politics of many so-called protest songs was also attributed to the dynamics of the capitalist marketplace. For instance, Josh Dunson, a young writer at both Sing Out! and Broadside, wrote that self-serving business interests could not tolerate pointed social criticism. Such interests sought songs with “enough protest to catch what was in the air, but not enough to start any winds blowing” (79). Young Dylan, who projected an image of worldly experience, generally escaped accusations of being vague (despite “Blowin’ in the Wind”) because, according to Silber, his lyrics dealt with the “world as it really is, or at least as it seems to him” (“Bob Dylan” 53).

[4] In a second article, Friesen acknowledged that Bound for Glory was perhaps not an overtly political book, but he nonetheless sought to reclaim it for the Folk Protest Movement. He described a series of letters in which Woody complained about his publisher’s editorial demands, excising the book’s more political content (Broadside 9 and 10 (July 1962)).
The “highway of diamonds” should be understood as a general symbol of excessive wealth, not as anything specifically related to diamond mines or gemstones. In the lyrics originally printed in Broadside, Dylan used the phrase “highway of golden,” presumably to mean the same thing. The Broadside lyrics also included a line that was later dropped from the song: “I heard the sound of one person who cried he was human” (Broadside 31 (Sept. 1963)). It may be that Dylan felt that the line said too directly what other lines portrayed indirectly through symbolism.

Lomax was not insensitive to performance styles and emotional content. In fact, in a 1959 article, he specifically encouraged white urban performers to learn from the styling of authentic performers (“The ‘Folkniks’ 30–31). His scholarly work was premised, however, on the study of emotional values as they arose out of particular cultures. As a result, Lomax generally preferred authentic folk performers over “citybilly” imitators. In the same year as his “Folkniks” article, Lomax dismissed the use of urban performers at the first Newport Folk Festival as a “publicity stunt” (Silber and Gahr 21–24).

The politics of white urban blues singers, such as Dave Van Ronk, provide an interesting contrast to those of the leaders of the Folk Protest Movement. Van Ronk called himself a “Trotskyite” and an anarchist (Elliot 53). In 1959, Van Ronk co-edited one of the first songbooks of original topical pieces by young Greenwich Village composers, The Bosses Songbook: Songs to Stifle the Flames of Discontent. The topic of many of the songs was the intellectualism and strict doctrines of the Folk Protest Movement, which the young songwriters lampooned and derided (Ronald D. Cohen 142). As a practical matter, Van Ronk’s politics probably meant that he didn’t like to be told what to think. He was joined in that regard by a number of free-spirited Boston blues singers, such as Eric von Schmidt, Geno Foreman, and Bob Neuwirth (von Schmidt and Rooney 60–91, 105–300).

Denisoff’s characterizations do not adequately account for the prominence of “magnetic” qualities in songs adapted in the 1950s and 1960s in the struggle for civil rights in the South. As noted by Daniel J. Gonzly, anti-establishment songs directed at college students or sung in coffeehouses differed fundamentally from more participatory songs that arose out of the Southern gospel tradition (24–27).

The title of “With God on Our Side” was originally “With God on Your Side” (emphasis added) (Broadside 27 (June 1963)). With the title's change in perspective, Dylan may have wanted his listeners to understand that they, too, were implicated in wrongful thinking.

As first noted by Wayne Hampton (106, 160–61), Dylan’s explanation appears to have been taken directly from a passage in Bound for Glory. In his book, Woody Guthrie implored newspapers with messages about mankind’s condition to keep on blowing down the streets of New York so that “just maybe someday, some time, somebody will pick you up...and read your message...and he’ll talk it and it’ll get around” (393–94).

The background and subject matter of “When the Ship Comes In” have been topics of considerable interest, beginning with Joan Baez’s revelation that Bob may have written the song as an angry response to having been snubbed by a rude hotel clerk (91). As noted by Todd Harvey, there are obvious similarities in melody and (perhaps) subject matter with the vengeful song “Pirate Jenny” from Bertolt Brecht’s and Kurt Weill’s The Threepenny Opera (119–20). As further noted by Harvey, the same song may have also influenced Dylan’s composition, “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” (64). Without naming specific songs of his own that resulted, Dylan has recently given an account of how he tried to learn from Brecht’s songwriting techniques, “Pirate Jenny” in particular (Chronicles 272–76).

Lomax may have first come to believe in the importance of direct experience to musical performance following a disastrous attempt (apparently in the 1940s) to transpose American folk songs for the symphony. He called the composer’s result a “colossal failure”: “The spirit and the emotion of ‘John Henry’ shone nowhere in his score because he had never heard, much less experienced them” (“Saga” 175).

Numerous scholars have pointed to the divisiveness of increased racial violence, together with the Vietnam War, as sounding the death-knell for the folk music revival (e.g. Lumer 56–57). Divisiveness over so-called “folk-rock” and the relevance of political issues also helped speed the end of Silber’s leadership of Sing Out. For a time in the mid-1960s, Paul Nelson,
formerly of the apolitical *The Little Sandy Review*, was managing editor, and, in 1967, Silber resigned from the Editorial Board.

**Works Cited**


