Tangled Up in Bob

A fan reflects on the renaissance of Bob Dylan, the chart-topping old troubadour who, at 65, redefines the meaning of a senior moment. BY WENDY DENNIS

Sometimes you get the chance to do something that makes you feel so full and happy, you know that if you did it you could die tomorrow without regret. So when I learned that Bob Dylan would be playing in a sweet little Triple A ballpark in Rochester, N.Y., this past August, as part of his summer ballpark tour, I didn't hesitate. I packed my bag and hit the road.

It was one of those starry summer nights, and the sky was backlit and lavender when he took the stage – the picture of courtly containment. He had on a black waistcoat and a black Stetson – with a bit of dazzle in the band – and a skinny moustache that looked as if it had been painted on. He put me in mind of Rhett Butler or Jesse James sidling up to the saloon bar. Then he took his place at the keyboard and began to sing in that godly, ravaged, love-addled voice, and I was gone.

I HAVE BEEN a Dylan fan for more than 40 years. Recently, it occurred to me that, however unwittingly, Dylan has been the most enduring relationship of my life. Love dies, youth flies, but amid the rubble and ruin he stands like a majestic temple that the Vandals forgot to raze. No one speaks more eloquently to me about the tragicomedy of the human condition. His music is where I go to find myself and figure things out.

I think of him as the essence of everything I love about America – a Huck Finn who left Hibbing, Minnesota, at 19 with a suitcase, guitar and $10 in his pocket to find his hero Woody Guthrie and seize his destiny in New York; who wrote a song for his ailing idol and visited him in a New Jersey hospital; who scorned the prophet's mantle and defiantly refused to be claimed.

Dylan embodies a certain idea of integrity that I think has been lost in our culture. Everything about him stands in mutinous opposition to the vile >

MARCO CIBOLA

Circa **1965, about to change pop music.**

fakery of our time. If you went to one of his concerts, for instance, you would never hear him say, "Hey, how are you doin' tonight, Cleveland?" As he told Rolling Stone magazine recently, "Nobody gives a shit about how you're doin' tonight in Cleveland." The man hates phonies. He reminds me of Holden Caulfield that way. And he has no time for small talk. "They say, 'Dylan never talks,'" he said. "What the hell is there to say?"

I think of him as an artist of my time, so I was curious to know why my 26-year-old daughter was keen to attend his concert.

Part of the allure, she said, was the prospect of seeing a legend: "If Abraham Lincoln were giving a speech, wouldn't you like to hear him?" She also said her generation lacked authentic voices, and that the concert-going experience has lost all sense of mystery.

THE MACHINERY OF CELEBRITY spits out an endless array of cookie-cutter stars eager to shill themselves on kiss-ass celebrity shows and pose for Vanity Fair. But Dylan has kept his distance from the crass bargains that are struck in the name of fame in America.

Dylan has always had a clear-eyed view of the hollowness of fame ("What good are fans? You can't eat applause for breakfast. You can't sleep with it."). And profound awareness of its price. In the first volume of his autobiography, *Chronicles,* he recounts wanting to "set fire" to the fans who in the mid-60s were climbing onto the roof of his home in Woodstock, N.Y., and writes that once his privacy was stolen from him, he also lost his ability "to observe anything without being observed." For a writer, there is no crueller loss.

There's a stunning piece of footage in Martin Scorsese's riveting documentary about Dylan's life, *No Direction Home: Bob Dylan,* that speaks eloquently to his preternaturally wise perspective on fame. Still barely into his 20s, the newly-minted celebrity sits in a limo in angelic, tousle-haired repose behind his dark shades while his fans clamour for an autograph.

"Bob! Bob! Give us your autograph," a girl begs, her nose pressed to the glass.

"What's the matter, Bob? Aren't you in a good mood today?"

"You don't need my autograph," he says gently. "If you needed it, I'd give it to you."

DYLAN TURNED 65 this past May, and, like many senior citizens, he has arthritis, a gaggle of grandchildren and a "World's Best Grandpa" bumper sticker. He has also, reportedly, taken up golf. But he told Rolling Stone recently that he considers these his "middle years," and, on his latest album, he slyly needles those who think he's past it: "You think I'm over the hill/You think I'm past my prime/Let me see what you got/We can have a whoppin' good time."

In a culture that vibrates with fear about aging, it's a kick watching Dylan age. He serves as an inspiration that growing older can be as much about vitality as loss, and that it can also be a time of grace, eroticism and romance. Dylan makes aging look sexy. For that alone, I love the guy.

His philosophy of life is simple: don't look back. He told the Los Angeles Times that he hates focusing on the past. "I'm always trying to stay right square in the moment."

And, as moments go, this is a kinetic one. For someone who shuns the spotlight (I defy you to name a star less likely to turn up on Letterman's couch), Dylan is everywhere these days. Todd Haynes is directing an upcoming biopic about his life, and a new Twyla Tharp musical based on his songs (*The Times They Are A-Changin'*) opened on Broadway this fall.

As for the man himself, he's been touring relentlessly; hosting a wildly popular XM Satellite Radio show where he spins his favourite discs; working on the >

BETTMAN/CORBIS

(Above) In his prime in the mid '60s; (right) at his peak in the mid '00s.

second volume of his luminously original autobiography, *Chronicles,* (*Volume One* launched to critical acclaim in 2004); appearing on camera in *No Direction Home;* and writing and producing his 44th album, *Modern Times,* his first in 30 years to hit number one.

The romantic ballads on *Modern Times* are among the most tender he has ever recorded. And he sings them in a lush nasal trill so sweet and lilting, it takes your breath away. "I hate to break it to Justin Timberlake," writes Jody Rosen on Slate.com, "but a wheezy old man has recorded the best make-out songs of 2006."

These are grown-up love songs, too; there's a gallantry about them, and sense of the preciousness of love in mortality's shadow: "In this earthly domain, full of disappointment and pain/You'll never see me frown/I owe my heart to you, and that's sayin' it true/And I'll be with you when the deal goes down," he croons in one ballad.

It's heretical to think of aging as beautiful in our culture, but I find it quite moving to watch a friend grow older, particularly one you've known since childhood. Somehow, seeing that face etched with experience while recalling how it once looked gives you a renewed respect for the distances they've travelled.

So it is with Dylan. When Dylan first came to the public's attention, he had an angelic face; now he has a gorgeous ruin of a face – weathered and craggy and wise. The sort of face you can imagine seeing carved in granite on Mount Rushmore.

WHEN I WAS YOUNG, I projected all my romantic fantasies onto Dylan, which is pretty hilarious because, of all the stars to have a massive transference with, he's the only one who would disdainfully rebuff my projections with a scorchingly honest song: "It ain't me, babe. It ain't me you're lookin' for, babe."

One of the many things Dylan was singing about in that song, I think, was his refusal to be a hero to anyone – not the folk purists who saw him as a political activist, not the children of the '60s who wished to claim him as their voice. At the time, I experienced the song almost as a personal rejection. Just one of many painful moments you go through when you're young and discover that life isn't as simple as you thought. Now that I'm older, it's clear to me that Dylan is simply stating a universal truth: that you can't expect any one person to be the one "to open each and every door." In other words, nobody can rescue you in life. You must pursue your own vision for yourself, unencumbered by the expectations of others.

THE CONCERT ENDED and the lights went down. When they came back up, Dylan and his band, who were all dressed in black, stood motionless in an eloquent tableau toward the left side of the stage. They looked like one of those daguerreotypes you see from the 19th century. Some of the boys in the band wore porkpie hats; Dylan, in his Stetson, stood slightly ahead of the others, a look of ennui on his face.

The tableau was oddly compelling; strange yet familiar. Dylan stood exceedingly still, arms slightly raised, elbows bent, as if caught in a holdup. His wrists were loose and his hands were curled half-open, as if to receive the applause, which was wild and prolonged. He didn't say a word or take a bow or change his expression, he just took his due and acknowledged his fans with a dignified, magnetic grace. It was simple, unadorned and electric. And then he was gone. •

BETTMAN/CORBIS; DAVID RAE MORRIS/EPA/CORBIS