

# ROMANTICISM TODAY: THE SINGER/SONGWRITER-PARADIGM

## Lecture 4: The Aesthetics of Rock

- 1) The Declaration of Independence (Bob Dylan)
- 2) The Emergence of Rock
- 3) It's Too Late to Stop Now (Van Morrison)

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### 1) The Declaration of Independence (Bob Dylan)

**Bob Dylan, "Like a Rolling Stone"**

Single release (July 1965) / *Highway 61 Revisited* (August 1965)

Once upon a time you dressed so fine  
You threw the bums a dime in your prime, didn't you?  
People call, say, "Beware doll, you're bound to fall"  
You thought they were all a-kiddin' you  
You used to laugh about  
Everybody that was hangin' out  
Now you don't talk so loud  
Now you don't seem so proud  
About having to be scrounging for your next meal

How does it feel  
How does it feel  
To be without a home  
Like a complete unknown  
Like a rolling stone?

You've gone to the finest school all right, Miss Lonely  
But you know you only used to get juiced in it  
And nobody has ever taught you how to live out on the street  
And now you're gonna have to get used to it

You said you'd never compromise  
With the mystery tramp, but now you realize  
He's not selling any alibis  
As you stare into the vacuum of his eyes  
And say do you want to make a deal?

How does it feel  
How does it feel  
To be on your own  
With no direction home  
Like a complete unknown  
Like a rolling stone?

You never turned around to see the frowns on the jugglers and the clowns  
When they all did tricks for you  
You never understood that it ain't no good  
You shouldn't let other people get your kicks for you  
You used to ride on the chrome horse with your diplomat  
Who carried on his shoulder a Siamese cat  
Ain't it hard when you discover that  
He really wasn't where it's at  
After he took from you everything he could steal

How does it feel  
How does it feel  
To be on your own  
With no direction home  
Like a complete unknown  
Like a rolling stone?

Princess on the steeple and all the pretty people  
They're all drinkin', thinkin' that they got it made  
Exchanging all precious gifts  
But you better take a diamond ring, you'd better pawn it babe  
You used to be so amused  
At Napoleon in rags and the language that he used  
Go to him now, he calls you, you can't refuse  
When you got nothing, you got nothing to lose  
You're invisible now, you got no secrets to conceal

How does it feel  
How does it feel  
To be on your own  
With no direction home  
Like a complete unknown  
Like a rolling stone?

### 1) Placing the Song

- Recorded live in the studio (CBS, New York City, 16 June 1965) by Bob Dylan (voc, rhythm guitar, harmonica), Mike Bloomfield (lead guitar), Paul Griffin (piano), Al Kooper (organ), Joe Macho Jr. (bass guitar), Bobby Gregg (drums), Bruce Langhorn (tambourine). Engineered by Roy Halee, produced by Tom Wilson.
- Version tentatively but 'organically' emerging from various aborted attempts in the studio, among them a 3/4-version with Dylan on piano (take 3).
- Six minutes and six seconds > nearly aborted due to objections of the marketing department, but finally released as a two-sided single on July 20.
- Highest chart position #2 September 4 (#1 The Beatles, "Help")
- Played live at Newport Folk Festival on July 25, 1965.

### 2) Voice/Lyrics and Subject Position

- Defiantly addressing a woman who has fallen on hard times ('you', 'Miss Lonely') and speculatively inhabiting her perspective, but no explicit 'I' position > the transferability of subject positions (singer > woman > audience)
- Parading a series of enigmatic personas ('mystery tramp', 'jugglers and clowns', the 'diplomat' with a 'Siamese cat' on his shoulders > with whom would you identify?)

### 3) Style and Form

- Classic rock line up *avant la lettre*, inclusion of keyboards indicates sophistication beyond folk authenticity, as does the electrification
- Verse 1 – chorus – verse 2 – chorus – verse 3 – chorus – verse 4 – chorus with brief harmonica interludes and outro
- Collective improvisation with distinct voices (Bloomfield's guitar, Kooper's organ) on a rather rugged basis (Dylan's guitar and Griffin's honky-tonk like piano)
- Unpolished feel

### 4) Reference

- Culminates in question ('How does it feel?') that focuses on experience rather than understanding and establishes a resonant simile ('like a rolling stone') that evokes the blues tradition (Muddy Waters) and the contemporary scene (the British invasion, the Rolling Stones)

## 2) The Emergence of Rock

The Beatles were the most important twentieth-century pop stars not simply because of their legacy of songs nor even because of the scale of their commercial success but because they forever changed pop's social and musical meanings and possibilities. [...] First, autonomy. The Beatles were a remarkably self-contained unit, writing their own songs, determining their production values, making their own career moves. [...] Second, ambition. The Beatles were the first pop musicians to challenge the clear distinction between high and low cultural spaces, to treat pop music as an art world.

(Frith et al. 2001, 77)

The idea of rock involves a rejection of those aspects of mass distributed music which are believed to be soft, safe or trivial, those things which may be dismissed as worthless 'pop' – the very opposite of rock. Instead, the styles, genres and performers that are thought to merit the name 'rock' must be seen as serious, significant and legitimate in some way.

(Keightley 2001, 109)

One of the great ironies of the second half of the twentieth century is that while rock has involved millions of people buying a mass-marketed, standardised commodity (CD, cassette, LP) that is available virtually everywhere, these purchases have produced intense feelings of freedom, rebellion, marginality, oppositionality, uniqueness and authenticity. It is precisely this predicament that defines rock, since negotiating the relationship between the 'mass' and the 'art' in mass art has been the distinguishing ideological project of rock culture since the 1960s. [...] Taking popular music seriously, as something 'more' than mere entertainment or distraction, has been the crucial feature of rock culture since its emergence.

(Keightley 2001, 109f.)

In the first edition [...], for convenience, I used the term 'rock' as shorthand for the diverse range of popular music genres produced in commodity form for a mass, predominantly youth market. This led to charges of my being 'rockist' [...], since fans of genres such as rap, techno, and reggae would hardly equate their preferences with 'rock'."

(Shuker 2001, ix)

Romanticism is a living popular creed, not a superannuated artistic movement; [...] this creed, originally the province of an educated minority, is now by mutation the ideological currency of the Western masses.

(Pattison 1987, 30)

The term 'singer songwriters' has been given to artists who both write and perform their material, and who are able to perform solo, usually on acoustic guitar or piano. An emphasis on lyrics has resulted in the work of such performers often being referred to as song poets, accorded auteur status, and made the subject of intensive lyric analysis. [...] The application of the term to solo performers is problematic, in that most of those mentioned usually perform with 'backing bands' and at times regard themselves as an integral part of these. Nonetheless, the concept of singer songwriter continues to have strong connotations of greater authenticity and 'true' auteurship.

(Shuker 2001, 103)

The aesthetics of 'authenticity' dominates mainstream rock vocalism: 'real experience', expressed with 'sincerity', is regarded as the indispensable basis of good (that is, 'honest') singing. The tendency to autobiography (or illusion of autobiography) towards which this pushes performers is illustrated at its most extreme in the work of 'confessional' singer-songwriters, from Joni Mitchell and Leonard Cohen down to Tracy Chapman and P.J. Harvey. [...] [W]hat happens here is that two distinct semiotic levels – that of the 'text' and that of the 'utterance' – are conflated; thus the subject of the song's lyric (of the *énoncé*, as the literary theorists

call it) is identified with that of the performance act (the *énonciation*). When Janis Joplin sings about 'me and Bobby McGee' in her famous recording of the Kris Kristofferson song with that title, most listeners probably identify the me as Joplin, and similarly, when Elvis Presley sings 'that's all right mama, that's all right with me', the 'me' is heard as being Elvis.

(Middleton 2000, 38f.)

Despite the conventions employed for assigned authorship, rock recordings frustrate the expectation that each work features *an* artist's intentions. The Rolling Stones' version of 'Not Fade Away' combines a song written by a Texan imitating an African American with an arrangement by English musicians and production influenced by Phil Spector. [...] If we want to assign 'Not Fade Away' to one person, it might be producer Andrew Oldham, who brought the various elements together. (Phil Spector was present at the recording session and may have contributed to the arrangement.)

(Gracyk 1996, 94)

I liked Jimi Hendrix's record of ["All Along the Watchtower"] and ever since he died I've been doing it that way. Funny though, his way of doing it and my way of doing it weren't that dissimilar, I mean the meaning of the song doesn't change like when some artists do other artists' songs. Strange though how when I sing it I always feel like it's a tribute to him in some kind of way.

(Dylan 1985, booklet p. 59)

I felt like 'Watchtower' was something I'd written but could never get together [...] I often feel that way about Dylan. I could never write the kind of words he does, but he's helped me out in trying to write.

(Jimi Hendrix qtd. in DiMartino 1994, 96)  
(on the complexity of 'reading'  
"All Along the Watchtower"  
see Reinfandt 2003, 341-350)

You can sing them [Dylan's lyrics] without feeling like an idiot. [...] I can only do so many love songs without feeling like an idiot. Dylan's songs go in lots of different directions, and I sing some of his songs because they speak to me emotionally on some level. Sometimes I don't even know why [...] you listen to the lyrics, and you go, "What the hell is this?" But there is something about it emotionally that says: This is talking about a kind of desperation that everybody experiences.

(Jerry Garcia qtd. in Henke 1995, 189)

I just thought it was incredible that this guy is not singing about 'moon in June' and he's getting away with it. That's what I thought at the time. The subject matter wasn't pop songs, ya know, and I thought this kind of opens the whole thing up. [...] You could write about virtually everything, and I think Dylan opened that up.

(Van Morrison qtd. in Stokes 2000)

### 3) It's Too Late to Stop Now (Van Morrison)

#### Van Morrison, "Cyprus Avenue"

*Astral Weeks* (1968)

And I'm caught one more time up on Cyprus Avenue  
And I'm caught one more time up on Cyprus Avenue  
And I'm conquered in a car seat, not a thing that I can do

I may go crazy before that mansion on the hill  
I may go crazy before that mansion on the hill  
But my heart keeps beating faster and my feet can't keep still

And all the little girls rhyme something on the way back home from school  
And all the little girls rhyme something on the way back home from school  
And the leaves fall one by one and call the autumn time a fool

Yeah my t-tongue gets tied every jiji-every every every time I try to speak  
My tongue gets tied every time I try to speak  
And my inside shakes just like a leaf on a tree

I think I'll go on by the river with my cherry cherry wine  
I believe I'll go walking by the railroad with my cherry cherry wine  
If I pass the rumbling station where the lonesome engine drivers pine

And wait a minute, yonder come my lady, rainbow ribbons in her hair  
Yonder come my lady, rainbow ribbons in her hair  
Six white horses and a carriage, she's returning from the fair  
Baby, baby, baby

And I'm caught one more time up on Cyprus Avenue, oh yes I am,  
And I'm caught one more time up on Cyprus Avenue  
And I'm conquered in a car seat and I'm looking straight at you

Way up on, way up on, way up on....  
The avenue of trees  
Came walking down  
In the wind and the rain, darling  
You came walking down when the sun shone through the trees  
Nobody, no, no, no, nobody stop me from loving you baby  
So young and bold, fourteen years old  
Baby, baby, baby...  
Ooooh-ee

### 1) Placing the Song

- Van Morrison started out as a professional musician in Belfast, playing saxophone in a dance band to G.I.'s in Germany before moving on to rhythm and blues with Them in the mid-60s ("Gloria", "Mystic Eyes", "The Story of Them Pts 1 and 2")
- Embarked on a successful solo career under the auspices of American producer Bert Berns (Bang Records) in 1967 (hit single: "Brown-Eyed Girl"), but relationship ended in acrimony due to Morrison's insistence on his autonomy ("T.B. Sheets")
- *Astral Weeks* was a new beginning and a declaration of independence: a genre-defying collective improvisation in the studio around Morrison's acoustic guitar and highly idiosyncratic singing, 8 tracks organised into "In the Beginning" (side A of LP) and "Afterwards" (side B)

### 2) Voice/Lyrics and Subject Position

- Autobiographical I channels memories, visions and dreams partly located in the Belfast of his youth and partly moving into mythical terrain, searching for the silence
- Stream-of-consciousness free form lyrics full of repetitions

### 3) Style and Form

- Collective improvisations drawing on highly professional jazz and folk musicians who were thrown into playing without much instruction (Van Morrison: vocals, acoustic guitar, Jay Berliner: classical and steel string acoustic guitar, Richard Davis: double bass, Connie Kay: drums, Warren Smith Jr., percussion and vibraphone, Larry Fallon: string arrangements, harpsichord)
- Highly idiosyncratic and at times slightly rugged soundscape matching Morrison's vocals
- "Cyprus Avenue" displays strong blues influence, but the instrumentation and the playing is different and connotes folk, jazz and classical influences

### 4) Reference

- Autobiography figures prominently (vs. Dylan's masks): immediacy, authenticity, spontaneous expression
- Morrison is particularly strong (but also at times erratic) as a live performer
- *Astral Weeks* was not particularly successful commercially, but sold well in the long run and has cult status (remastered and expanded version 2015)
- *Astral Weeks Live at the Hollywood Bowl* (CD and DVD, 2009)
- "Up on Cyprus Avenue": Concerts on Van Morrison's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday (31<sup>st</sup> August 2015) on location in Belfast

## Van Morrison, “Cypress Avenue”

Seminal live recording from summer 1973 on *It's Too Late to Stop Now* (1974), accompanied by the Caledonian Soul Orchestra:

Van Morrison: vocals  
Jeff Labes: piano, organ  
John Platania: guitar, backing vocals  
David Hayes: bass guitar, backing vocals  
Dahaud Shaar: drums, backing vocals  
Bill Atwood: trumpet, backing vocals  
Jack Schroer: saxophones, tambourine, backing vocals  
Nathan Rubin: first violin  
Tom Halpin or Tim Kovatch: violin  
Nancy Ellis: viola  
Teresa Adams: cello

- generally regarded one of the best live albums of all times
- the full material from the tour is scheduled for release as *It's Too Late to Stop Now Vol. II, III and IV* for June 10, 2016 (box set including film material)

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