

"Sound"



Dylan: Knockin' on Limbo's Door?

By Charles
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The rumor's been on the streets for years. Don't tell me you haven't heard the whispers. Robert Christgau may be talking about The Blasters in print, but when you get him drunk you can't shut him up on this "Bob Dylan is dead" thing. And Dave Marsh might be all ga-ga over Springsteen when you see him on Nightline, but when he and Ted Koppel head off for Chinese food afterward, it's "Dylan is dead" rumors until four in the morning.

Of course, the "McCartney is dead" rumors started the whole thing. After that any change of habit warranted a death rumor. Bowie and Lou Reed were excluded from any rumors because a man can only die and be reborn so many times. Grace Slick was dead for a while there, probably smothered in her sleep in some sanitarium, but she's stayed so dead that now resurrection rumors seem spurious.

John Cougar Mellancamp's record company attempted to start a reverse rumor, trying to sell the press and other carriers of contagious gossip on a rumor that John Cougar Mellancamp was dead before 1982 and only a real living human being after that. Funny thing is, most of the press seemed to buy it.

But for those who were seeking more than just commercial suicides and eventual rebirths, the "Dylan is dead" rumor had it all.

It was the proper blend of zombie movie, commercial conspiracy, pagan death symbolism, aural evidence, lethal circumstance and staggering coincidence that makes a rumor get larger and healthier as the years go by.

(1) Bob Dylan died in a motorcycle accident in 1968. Dylan rolled off a cliff on his Harley.

It is believed that Arlo Guthrie knew Dylan was dead and that is why he wrote the "Pickle Song." Because Arlo Guthrie thought Dylan's record company and the spirited multi-nationals (read International Jewish Banker's conspiracy, who seemed already to have an inkling that Dylan might go Zionist sometime in the '80s) that backed the record company, might pick him to be the next Dylan, allowing Guthrie's record company to kill him off by holding a meeting between Tim Buckley or Donovan (posing as Guthrie) and mass murderer Juan Corona on the subject of migrant worker's conditions in California. Buckley or Donovan had become such worthless additions to Warner Records that their bodies turning up in a pit, chopped to bits with Corona's machete, wouldn't make any difference in the great scheme of things.

Something, however, went wrong. Perhaps it was Buckley and Donovan's reluctance to sacrifice their lives in the interests of keeping Bob Dylan alive. Perhaps it was Juan Corona's reluctance to chop anyone up on media instructions. Corona was notably free-spirited.

Whichever theory you choose to believe, the shuffling of folk stars did not occur and Arlo Guthrie was left with an absurd folk ditty about surviving a lethal motorcycle accident by landing on a police car.

Perhaps it was the song itself that turned off Dylan's record company. Dylan had by 1968 become too spiritual to write anything so funny. Obviously Guthrie just wasn't taking the whole business seriously enough.

For years Buckley and Donovan tried to tell their stories to the authorities, about how they were set-up to talk to a mass murderer in a secluded area of California, given thousands of dollars by four masked men wearing

yamulkas, and then discovered the truth . . .

Because the authorities could not tell Buckley from Donovan and in some cases kept referring to both of them as "Mr. Dylan" and "Mr. Guthrie," nothing came of the allegations.

(2) There is only wild speculation as to who actually took Dylan's place after the accident. Some say it was an unknown folk singer who had never played in public before but wrote passable songs. Some say it was just a gravel-voiced impersonator and that Dylan's label reassembled the Brill building pop-song writers to pen future Dylan hits. Carole King, Neil Sedaka and Neil Diamond deny this. Don Kirschner refused to comment. Looking at the output of these stars since 1968, this rumor seems somewhat apocryphal.

After Dylan's "Slow Train Coming" was released, rumors circulated wildly about Dylan's place actually being taken by Jimmy Swaggart, the television evangelist. This seems like exaggeration to me and doesn't hold much water unless you merely attribute the songwriting to Swaggart and the actual vocals to someone else. When asked about the theory, Swaggart responded without hesitation that Bob Dylan was a Jew and then muttered something about the eye of a needle.

Since then Dylan impersonation became kind of a fad among young folk stars. Several married beautiful young women by telling them they were Dylan. Most of these pretenders were discredited because the real Dylan impersonator could be seen in concert or, much later, on MTV at the same time they were getting hitched or renting cars under Dylan's name. One even managed to buy a house in Carmel by signing the papers Robert Zimmerman. The real estate company seemed to think this secret knowledge was enough for instant credit.

(3) Of course, the crux of any Dylan is dead argument is the song "Lay, Lady Lay" off Dylan's "Nashville Skyline" LP. The record was recorded just after the motorcycle accident and this vocal performance is certainly not Dylan. Only two things could account for the vocal on this song:

(A) Ten rubber tourniquets were wrapped around Dylan's trachea and a lint filter was shoved to the back of his throat, or

(B) This is not Dylan at all. Most people who have spent years studying this rumor opt for the latter.

(4) For so long it seemed inevitable that Dylan and Joan Baez would be paired off for connubial bliss. After the motorcycle accident Dylan showed little if any interest in Baez. He became interested in people outside of the spotlight. Perhaps this is because only Baez would be able to tell the new Dylan from the old one. Nothing could hurt the record company's conspiracy more than Baez dashing out of the Dylan honeymoon ranch caterwauling something about "unreasonable facsimiles."

(5) Dylan wore white face make-up for the Rolling Thunder Review in the early '70s. Unless Dylan was attempting to play the lead in Gilbert and Sullivan's "The Mikado," there seems to be no other explanation for this than to refer to most pagan cultures. This is a death-mask. It is a clue to the devoted. Dylan is dead, long live Dylan. The fact that this sort of weirdness saturated the early '70s should be taken into consideration, of course.

(6) Dylan associates have changed drasti-

cally. The Rolling Thunder Review, which Dylan had apparently planned since before the accident, saw Dylan surrounded by Sioux Indians, jugglers, clowns, old hippies and some Hell's Angels.

Now Dylan is surrounded by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers and The Grateful Dead. One could argue that Petty and his band represent the jugglers and clowns whereas The Grateful Dead certainly qualify as old hippies and therefore, Dylan's associations have not changed at all.

Dylan's attempting to sing with Michael Jackson, Lionel Richie, Bruce Springsteen, Ray Charles and Cyndi Lauper on "We Are the World" is definite proof that the actual Dylan is no more. There is even a scene in the video for this song where several Top 40 pop stars are seen teaching Dylan how to sing. Dylan listens patiently. This is not Bob Dylan.

(7) Another clue to the faithful: Dylan is touring with the Grateful Dead. Not as subtle as backmasking "Turn Me On Dead Man" but in the '80s subtlety is rare.

(8) In the same Dylan that used to ramble about Botticelli's niece and Genghis Khan the same Dylan who penned "What's a Sweetheart like You, Doing in a Place Like This," or "God Gave Names to All the Animals?" The switch from cabalistic rantings inspired by the intense reading of Rimbaud and Verlaine to Top 40 doggerel seems significant.

(9) One of the most startling recent discoveries is that the people of Duluth, Minn., Dylan's hometown, also knew the new Dylan is a phony. The City Council denied permission for a street to be named after Dylan. No official reason was given for the denial but rumor has it that the city council voted on whether or not Dylan was dead. Almost all conceded. If your hometown doesn't know you, who does?

The clincher to this story is that Dylan's father is on the city council.

(10) If Dylan is indeed deceased, one theory has it that there have been many Dylans in an effort to keep up with commercial needs. The first pretend Dylan was all right until it was noticed that nobody gave two hoots in hell about his guruhood anymore. Then came the subservient Dylan, serving somebody — the righteous reverent Dylan. This earned Dylan his first big cover story in a long while from Rolling Stone magazine and national attention. "Dylan and the Christian God," a concert tour in the works?

But the Judeo-Christian God took a big kick in the pants PR-wise come 1980, and Dylan hooked up with MTV and Zionism, a telling contract, indeed.

Proof comes in the form of the live album, "Real Live." This was a risky venture anyway on the part of the record executives, but they needed an album that would link all the Dylans together to show there was only one Dylan. The Dylan on this LP is fine on the newer stuff, probably because they were his recordings, not so bad on older tunes, probably because he sang these in grade school, but real shaky on middle period stuff penned by one of the pretenders. An excellent example is "Tangled Up in Blue," where this knew kid just doesn't remember the lyrics and starts making them up as he goes along.

The record company immediately had this new Dylan grant an interview in which he told the press that the lyrics he used on "Real Live" were the ones he's preferred in the first place. Because Dylan had never been a very good judge of his own work, the press wandered away satisfied.