

contact

Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Mabey, David. 1972. 'A Broadening of the Smile'. *Contact*, 4. pp. 14-16. ISSN 0308-5066.

A BROADENING OF THE SMILE

Back in 1970, on the LP C.J.Fish, the American group Country Joe and the Fish recorded a song called Hey Bobby. It was addressed to Bob Dylan, and was a curious mixture of nostalgia and resentment for his opting out of the American rock music scene, with its extreme pressures and political and cultural commitments.

"Hey Bobby, where you been?
Missed you out on the street.
Heard you've got yourself a brand new scene -
It's called a retreat."

In many ways Dylan's most recent single release, Watch the River Flow, is his reply to Country Joe's song. Certainly, on first hearing, it could belong to 1966, to the powerful electric rock music of Rainy Day Women and Leopard Skin Pill-Box Hat. Dylan seems to have finished, temporarily at least, with the soupy violins and choirs that decorated much of his recent music, for in Watch the River Flow we are back with the rock beat, and boogie piano and the scorching guitar of Robbie Robertson. As well as this, Dylan has abandoned his new 'musical' voice in favour of the half-speaking, half-shouting that was so crucial to his early songs; the characteristic inflections and accents have returned, as Dylan moulds the syllables and phrases of the song almost out of recognition.

But if the music is reminiscent of 1966, the words of the song could only belong to Dylan in 1971. And they are something of a shock given Dylan's situation, apparently content and living with his wife on a farm outside New York. This new song seems to suggest that he is beginning to miss the activity and pace of life in the city. It's as if he is starting to feel complacent, even slightly bored with his own life at the moment, and wants to return to the heart of things, to the streets where he once belonged. But in the song, at least, it is little more than a hint, for in the end Dylan's mood is one of joyful resignation - to 'sit on a bank of sand, and watch the river flow'.

To see the true significance of this we must go back to 1966, and to Dylan's LP Blonde on Blonde. The crucial song on this LP is Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands. By any standards this is one of Dylan's major achievements; the music has a timelessness and simple majesty almost unequalled in his work, whilst the lyrics are some of the most expansive and poignant that pop has produced. Dylan's sad eyed lady is a woman, and yet she stands for all women. In the song she is cast as a nun, an image which can be both literal and symbolic. She is triumphant in her isolation, piously innocent, vulnerable and exploitable, and yet she is potentially indestructible. She can be a friend, girlish lover, mother and a god to man. At the same time, Dylan has cast her as the woman immortal, a woman not for men (one is reminded of Catherine in the film Jules et Jim). It is of this woman, or image of woman, that Dylan asks

"My warehouse eyes, my Arabian drums,
Should I leave them by your gate,
Or, sad eyed lady, should I wait?"

In the song, it is a question that Dylan leaves unanswered. But in retrospect one realises that the answer is contained in Dylan's next two LP's, John Wesley Harding and Nashville Skyline. One can see now that he did wait; however distant, Dylan's sad eyed lady is a human being, not a god fit only for gifts and adulation.

Given this interpretation of the song, it can be seen as the beginning of a long parable that includes John Wesley Harding and culminates in Nashville Skyline. However, the roots of this parable of Becoming may lie much further back. Dylan has come a long way from the turbulence of spirit that characterises his earlier songs. The youthful assertion of self as he sings defiantly

"No, no, no, it ain't me babe,
It ain't me you're looking for, babe."

contrasts strongly with the prevailing tone of Nashville Skyline which is one of staying rather than leaving. However, the change is not an easy or a quick one. The religious conflicts and doubts laid bare in John Wesley Harding may take a lifetime to resolve, but now, at least, Dylan doesn't need to be alone to solve them.

In John Wesley Harding, with its collection of almost Bunyanesque allegories, Dylan is in a state of turmoil; doubt, guilt feelings and self-deception predominate. (The overall effect was described succinctly by the critic Paul Nelson as being rather like Jean Paul Sartre with a 5-string banjo.) But at the end of the LP one feels that Dylan has reached an important conclusion; he returns to humanity and to humanism as he sings Down Along the Cove:

"Down along the cove
I see my true love coming my way;
Lord have mercy,
I'm so glad to see you coming today."

It is here that we realise that he has not 'waited' in vain. The last song on the LP, I'll Be Your Baby Tonight, allows Dylan to relax (something his audience would never allow) and to feel, perhaps for the first time, what it is like to have peace of mind. It has taken more than two years from the time he wrote Tombstone Blues (1966)

"I wish I could write you a melody so plain,
To keep you, dear lady, from going insane.
To ease you and cool you, and cease the pain,
Of your useless and pointless knowledge."

to the eventual fulfilment of that wish in I'll Be Your Baby Tonight (1968). For those who had followed Dylan from the beginning, the initial effect was a mixture of disappointment and puzzlement; for Dylan was asking to be treated simply as a human being. He is no longer the Anguished Poet, but a man with a simple, but rare talent; the ability to say with honesty and simplicity what it is like to be happy. And Nashville Skyline is a broadening of the smile.

It's not difficult to relate these changes to Dylan's own life. Increasingly his songs have become celebrations, not only of himself, but of his lover - his wife - as well. By 1970 it had become apparent that he no longer wanted, or indeed needed, to communicate in the terms that he had done before. (In fact, at the Isle of Wight Festival in 1969 he showed this without doubt. One of the early songs that he sang was One Too Many Mornings. During this a mere gesture on Dylan's part seemed to completely sum up his attitude to himself as an artist. He raised his right hand high in the air, and shook it as he sang:

"Everything I'm saying
You can say it just as good."

This expression of private grief had become a public statement about Dylan's own art.)

Since John Wesley Harding Dylan's songs have become plain statements, using simplified language and uncomplicated musical accompaniments. Yet what strikes one about Nashville Skyline, and particularly about songs like Lay Lady Lay, is that they are so complete; they have a glorious simplicity and confidence. Certainly there are times when one longs for the sumptuous poetry of Sad Eyed Lady and Visions of Joanna, but we must realise that, given Dylan's present situation, this sort of language is no longer relevant. An on the LP Self Portrait Dylan even allows himself to sing songs written by other people. This LP is Dylan's 'family favourites' - a collection of songs that he probably sings and listens to what he is at home.

Given the self-confidence and sure-footed insularity that these recent LP's reflect, it's rather surprising that Dylan should record a song like Watch the River Flow. Especially with its citified electric rock accompaniment and delivery it seems to suggest that Dylan may be getting 'itchy feet'. In fact, musically Dylan has almost come full circle since 1966, and it may well be that he will once again emerge to put some of the joyful honesty back into rock music.

DAVID MABEY.