

Words: Nigel Williamson

ROCK OF AGES

Nearly four decades ago, in June 1965, **BOB DYLAN** recorded what many consider to be the greatest single ever made. This is the story of “Like A Rolling Stone”

FORTY YEARS AGO next month, Bob Dylan walked into Columbia’s Studio A on New York’s Seventh Avenue and recorded the greatest single in the history of popular music.

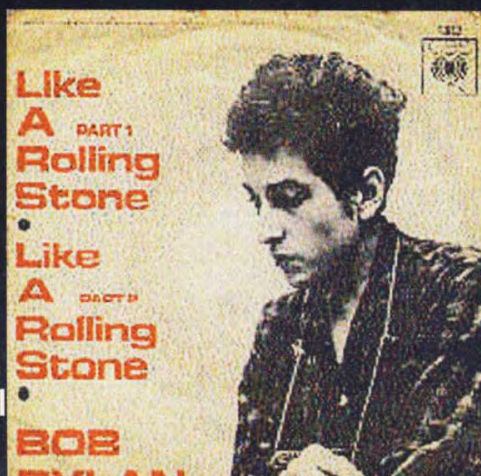
On the original tapes, at the end of take four on day two – the one on which they nailed it and which 34 days later would be released as the world’s longest single to date – the voice of producer Tom Wilson can be heard saying: “That sounds good to me.”

Dylan knew it was more than good. As he told a radio interviewer shortly afterwards, the song represented “a whole new category”. “Like A Rolling Stone” changed the parameters of what was possible in four verses and a chorus, a paradigm shift that meant

(a) songwriting would never be the same again and (b) Dylan could claim without a hint of hubris that “nobody’s ever written songs before, really”.

In six minutes and six seconds – or 5.59 as Columbia claimed on the label in the hope that by coming in under the six-minute barrier they could ease the qualms of radio programmers – Dylan delivered Tin Pan Alley its nemesis.

Everybody else knew it, too. Over in LA, when Frank Zappa first heard “Like A Rolling Stone”, he wanted to quit the music business. “I felt if this wins, and it does what it’s supposed to do, I don’t need to do anything else,” he later recalled. In New Jersey, a 15-year-old Bruce Springsteen was also acutely aware that here was something entirely new in popular music. “Elvis freed your body,” he observed almost a quarter of a century later. But Dylan had gone one better and made a record that “freed your mind”. Back in London, contemplating the Ivor Novello they’d just won for writing “Can’t Buy Me Love” in a style that now seemed quaint and outdated, John Lennon and Paul McCartney listened hard, then went away and raised their creative bar with *Rubber Soul*. ➤





Once upon a time... :
Dylan during the
recording of 1965's
Highway 61 Revisited

Dylan's delivery is a sour-toned taunt that curls and twists from the corners of his mouth

"Like A Rolling Stone" was not so much a song as a revolution – which explains why next month Faber & Faber will publish Greil Marcus' *Like A Rolling Stone: Bob Dylan At The Crossroads*. A quick check of the British Library catalogue suggests it's only the third case of an entire book written about a single song – the others being "Amazing Grace" and "Strange Fruit", examples which emphasise rather than diminish the rarity of the accolade.

Dylan's own response to the 40th anniversary of his greatest song has been less enthusiastic. He sang it as an encore in early March 2005 on the first couple of dates of his current American tour. Then he replaced it with "All Along The Watchtower" and, at the time of writing, the song had only made one subsequent reappearance on his set-list, in Chicago in early April.

JUNE 1965. Astronaut Edward White has just completed the first American space walk, and the US Army is deploying battalion-sized combat units in Vietnam for the first time, signalling a major escalation of its direct participation in a war which will see 190,000 American soldiers stationed in Vietnam before the year is out.

Somewhere between these twin symbols of the optimism of the new frontier and the looming despair of South East Asia, in a Manhattan studio on June 16, Dylan and a bunch of session musicians – including guitarist Mike Bloomfield, drummer Bobby Gregg, pianist Paul Griffin, bassist Joe Macho Jnr, Al Kooper on organ and Bruce Langhorne, brandishing the same giant Turkish tambourine that

had only recently inspired another great Dylan song – made history of their own.

Dylan and Wilson had spent a frustrating time the previous day with a slightly different line-up of musicians recording half a dozen uninspired takes of "Like A Rolling Stone". They had also attempted versions of "Phantom Engineer" (later reworked as "It Takes A Lot To Laugh, It Takes A Train To Cry") and "Sitting On A Barbed Wire Fence", neither of which were to make the *Highway 61 Revisited* album.

"Like A Rolling Stone" might so easily have gone the same way. Revealingly, 10 different takes can be found hidden inside the 1995-released *Highway 61* interactive CD-ROM. A minute into the first take on day one, Dylan stops to complain: "It got lost, man." The next take finds an exasperated Bloomfield playing the bossy muso: "E flat minor suspended fourth – E flat minor without the seventh – E flat minor suspended," he tells them. "That's right," says Dylan, causing considerable laughter.

Another take is destroyed almost before it's begun by the overbearing Hammond of organist Frank Owen, ensuring he isn't invited back the following day.

Then there's the half-formed take in a 3/4 waltz time that we eventually got to hear in 1991 on *The Bootleg Series: Volumes 1-3*, on

which Dylan fluffs the words ("you used to make fun about" instead of "laugh about"), and which collapses two minutes in when Dylan splutters, "The voice is gone, man. Do you want to try it again?" Although recorded just 24 hours earlier, it's a completely different song to the definitive version – slow, melancholic and more like a folk ballad than the future of rock'n'roll.

FORTUNATELY, THEY DID try it again. By the following day, Owen and guitarist Al Gorgoni were gone and in came the 21-year-old Al Kooper, whose presence was to prove crucial. Primarily a guitarist, he had been invited by Wilson to watch from the control room because he was a Dylan fan, and was not booked to play on the session. But Kooper had other ideas.

"The session was booked for two in the afternoon, so I got there early, about 1.20pm, with my guitar, sat down, plugged in and warmed up," he recalls. "At about a quarter to two, Dylan came in with Mike Bloomfield, who I didn't know."

When Kooper heard Bloomfield warming up, he quietly unplugged his guitar and retreated to the control room, knowing he couldn't compete. "He was way over my head. I never heard a white person play like that in my life," he later said.

The first couple of rehearsal takes found the group working towards the sound Dylan wanted, with Griffin at the Hammond organ. Then Wilson moved him to

the piano, looking for a brighter texture. Seizing his chance, Kooper told the producer, "Hey, I got a really good part for this on the organ." Wilson brushed the idea aside, reminding Kooper that he couldn't actually play the organ. At that →



My way or the Highway: Bob strikes up the band
Inset: ace of bass





Come gather round pebble: Bob with his studio entourage (manager Albert Grossman in white behind Dylan) Inset: return to Fender



moment, the producer was called away from the control booth to take a phone call and, when he returned, Kooper was seated behind the Hammond. "He didn't say no, so I went out there," he reasons today.

It's a story that has long been part of rock 'n' roll folklore, along with the suspicion that it has probably been exaggerated in the telling over the years. Except that the evidence is right there on the tape. When Wilson returns, he can be heard saying to Kooper in surprised tones, "What are you doing there?" The two men laugh, Wilson says, "Oh, OK," and Kooper is permitted to stay as the tape rolls on another take.

Astonishingly, although he didn't know the song and had no proficiency on the instrument, Kooper's instinctive Hammond playing immediately provided the missing element that enabled everything else to fall into place. After one incomplete run-through and a couple of false starts, they captured the song in a cataclysmic take in which Kooper's exultant chords keep the track buoyant throughout its six minutes, backing off at just the right moment to let Bloomfield's guitar cut loose and then surging forward again when he's finished soloing. Meanwhile, Griffin's piano circles around them and Dylan delivers his acidic sneer-as-high-art in a sour-toned taunt that curls and twists from the corners of his vengeful mouth with magisterial disdain.

UNUSUALLY, THE NORMALLY reticent Dylan has given a detailed description of the song's writing. It bears repeating if only because – as so often with Dylan – it raises as many questions as it answers.

Arriving back in America on June 2, 1965, at the end of a triumphant but emotionally gruelling tour of Britain (brilliantly depicted in all its edgy, wired intensity in *Don't Look Back*), a drained Dylan, tired and unwell from exhaustion and drugs, retired to a cabin in Woodstock which was owned by the mother

of Peter Yarrow (of Peter, Paul & Mary fame).

With him was Sara Lowndes, soon to be his wife, and while there Dylan apparently promised her that not only was he finished with Joan Baez (their relationship can be seen unravelling in *Don't*

Look Back) but he was also through with rock 'n' roll. Then along came "Like A Rolling Stone", unbidden and initially unwanted.

"I wrote that after I had quit," Dylan claimed in February 1966. "I'd literally quit singing and playing." Instead, he found himself "writing this story, this long piece of vomit, 20 pages long, and out of it I took 'Like A Rolling Stone' and made it as a single."

That he regarded the song as some kind of a breakthrough – a quantum leap, even – was evident. "It suddenly came to me that this is what I should

"Anybody can write a lot of the things I used to write. I just wrote 'em first" – Dylan

do," he said shortly after the song's release. "Nobody had ever done that before. A lot of people – anybody can write a lot of the things I used to write. I just wrote 'em first because nobody else could think of writing them. But that's only because I was hungry. But I've never met anybody, or heard anything, and I hear a lot..."

At this point his voice trailed off, as if contemplating the power of the song had overwhelmed him and robbed him of articulacy. "I'm not saying it's better than anything else," he resumed. "I'm saying that I think 'Like A Rolling Stone' is definitely the thing which I should do. After writing that I wasn't interested in writing a novel or a play. I just had too much. I want to write songs. Because it was a whole new category. I mean, nobody's ever really written songs before, really."

HE WAS RIGHT. He'd hinted at it before on several of the songs on *Bringing It All Back Home*, released in March of that year. But "Like A Rolling Stone" represented an entirely new genre of songwriting, full of surreal allusions to characters such as "Miss Lonely", the "mystery tramp" and a "Napoleon in rags", plus indecipherable references to a "diplomat" on a "chrome horse" with a "Siamese cat".

It was more Ginsberg than "Going To A Go-Go", despite Dylan's subsequent assertion that Smokey Robinson was one of America's greatest living poets. It was a song that created its own mysterious, self-contained world. Yet it was also undeniably rock 'n' roll, as hard-hitting as anything in the Lieber and Stoller songbook. "Hound Dog" meets *Howl* in a feral yelp of poetic genius.

It's quite probable that the "long piece of vomit about 20 pages long" was originally intended as part of *Tarantula*, the half-completed novel he'd been

working on over the previous year. Instead, it proved to be the end of Dylan's pretensions as a novelist, and the book was cast aside. He had already transcended the form and realised that he could say more in a four-, five- or six-minute song than he could in a 300-page novel.

The theory that the lyrics of "Like A Rolling Stone" may have started life as a passage intended for *Tarantula* was lent credence by Dylan himself when he later described the song as "just a rhythm thing on paper" which, he claimed, he'd never thought of as a song "until one day I was at the piano and on the paper it was singing 'How does it feel' in a slow-motion pace."

He told a slightly different story to Cameron Crowe in the sleeve notes for the 1985 box set *Biograph*, mentioning neither retirement nor the 20 pages of →



So much boulder then: Bob leaves no stone unrolled

prose: "I wrote the song in this cabin. We had come up from New York and I had about three days up there to get some stuff together. It just came, you know. It started with that 'La Bamba' riff."

So was rock 'n' roll's poet laureate really dissuaded from his intention to quit by a Richie Valens record? Certainly if he had considered abandoning music, it was one of the shortest retirements in history, for within 13 days of his return from Britain he was back in the studio.

In that time he had written his "long piece of vomit", sat at the piano and found a song hidden inside, and then taught it to Mike Bloomfield.

"I went to his house and the first thing I heard was 'Like A Rolling Stone,'" Bloomfield recalled in 1968. "He wanted me to get the concept of it, how to play it. I figure he wanted blues, string-bending, because that's what I do. He said, 'Hey man, I don't want any of that BB King stuff.' So I really fell apart. What the heck does he want? We messed around with the song. I played the way that he dug and he said it was groovy."

None of which addresses what the song is about. Yet here, too, Dylan has been unusually forthcoming about its impetus, telling us the lyric came from "steady hatred directed at some point that was honest. In the end it wasn't hatred. It was telling someone something they didn't know. Revenge. That's a better word... In your eyesight, you see your victim swimming in lava. Hanging by their arms from a birch tree. Skipping, kicking the tree, hitting

a nail with your foot. Seeing someone in the pain they were bound to meet up with."

SO WHAT BROUGHT about this volcanic eruption of hatred or revenge? And who was the someone to whom Dylan was so forcefully delivering a few home truths?

There have been many theories. The hapless Joan Baez, who, as can be seen in *Don't Look Back*, had been the target of such scorn and derision on the recent British tour? Surely too easy a target. Baez herself believed the subject was Bobby Neuwirth, one of Dylan's closest allies on that tour. Or was it a cleverly disguised piece of self-analysis in which the someone who needed telling something they didn't know was Dylan himself?

In his book *My Back Pages: Classic Bob Dylan 1962-69*, *Uncut* writer Andy Gill leans towards the latter theory, pointing out that Dylan's mother's maiden name was Stone and he had indeed rolled a long way from home. Gill argues that at the core of "Like A Rolling Stone" is the argument

that "truly to know yourself and find fulfilment, you must face the world alone, mould your future and your philosophy from your own experience without the comforts of favour or patronage. Instead, one has to push off from the shore, head out into uncharted waters with no direction home."

It's an interpretation echoed by Jan Wenner, whose *Rolling Stone* magazine last year named "Like A Rolling Stone" number one in a list of the world's

500 greatest songs. "You're invisible; you've got no secrets". That's so liberating," he's quoted as saying in Greil Marcus' new book. "You've got nothing to fear any more. It's useless to hide any of that shit. You're a free man." In this reading, Dylan's "triumphant sneer of schadenfreude" instead becomes a revelatory and liberating moment of self-awareness.

BUT, OF COURSE, what makes "Like A Rolling Stone" the greatest single of all time is not just the song. It's the performance. As the composer Michael Pisaro has noted, Dylan's voice is infinitely nuanced and the delivery full of such conviction that its layers of meaning would be as self-evident if Dylan was singing in "ancient Greek or contemporary Russian".

At the end of his book, Marcus reminds us that although "Like A Rolling Stone" was a triumph of craft, will, inspiration and intent, the genius of the version we know lies in the fact that it was also an accident.

From the first pistol shot of Bobby Gregg's snare to the song's harmonica fade, the released take was a one-off that couldn't be repeated. Dylan and his musicians tried another dozen takes and none of them recaptured the spirit of that unique moment. And that, ultimately, is what makes "Like A Rolling Stone" an event rather than merely a piece of pop music. By definition, an event is something that can only ever occur once. The glory is that it happens again every time we hear it.

Nigel Williamson's *The Rough Guide To Bob Dylan* is available now. Greil Marcus' *Like A Rolling Stone: Bob Dylan At The Crossroads* will be reviewed in full alongside an interview with the author in next month's *Uncut*

"HOW DOES IT FEEL...?"

Ten covers of "Like A Rolling Stone"

Climbing over the fallen bodies of Michael Bolton, Cher, Nancy Sinatra and James Last, among the other brave and/or foolhardy souls who have recorded versions of the song are...

Spirit

on *Spirit Of '76*, 1975

A shimmering reinvention from the late, great Randy California. Up there as one of the all-time great Dylan covers.

The Rolling Stones

on *Stripped*, 1995

Recorded shortly after Bob himself turned up one night at a Stones gig in Montpelier to sing it with Jagger.

The Wailers

recorded in 1966, available on *One Love At Studio One*

Released simply as "Rolling Stone" with Bunny Wailer embroidering some rather good lyrics of his own: "Nobody told you was to roam on the street/But that's what happens when you lie and cheat".

The Young Rascals

on *The Young Rascals*, 1966

Sure it's derivative, but the one-note organ and shouts of "C'mon!" that lead off every verse are great.

The Turtles

on *It Ain't Me Babe*, 1965

Their debut album was full of Dylan covers, but they give up on the big one after just two verses.

Flatt & Scruggs

on *Nashville Airplane*, 1969

You thought it was a song about New York hipster cool until you heard this bluegrass makeover.

Mick Ronson with David Bowie

on *Heaven And Hell*, 1994

After the Spiders From Mars he joined the Rolling Thunder Revue, so why not?

Robyn Hitchcock

on *Royal Queen Albert & Beautiful Homer*, 1997

It took guts to re-enact Bob's famous 1966 show and record it live at the Borderline...

Judy Collins

on *Just Like A Woman: Judy Sings Dylan*, 1993

An inventive folk-jazz interpretation that gives the song surprising new wings.

John Mellencamp

on *Bob Dylan: The 30th Anniversary Concert Celebration*, 1993

Some poor sap had to sing it that night - and it was the artist formerly known as Cougar who drew the chart-stay