

Bob's Woodstock Set

By John Nogowski

Ed. Note: This didn't happen – as far as we know. But it could have....

Line 1 was lit.

The voice on the other end was Old World money, wrapped in a smile. "Rachel, I'd like you to do something for me..."

"Yes, sir."

"I'd like you to go down to Crawford Doyle and have them get me a first edition of 'Walden.' When you get it, I'd like you to send it right away to Hi Lo Ha. I also have a note I'd like you to enclose for me."

"Yes, sir."

Hi Lo Ha. She knew what that meant. A first edition of "Walden." Why "Walden?" And it's going to Hi Lo Ha. Wouldn't the world like to know that? Hi Lo Ha.

Summer was fighting its way into New York City. The streets were wet and messy and up on the 11th floor office of the CBS Building, life was good. Sales were better. Simon and Garfunkel's "Bridge Over Troubled Water" had been a smash, Blood, Sweat and Tears were rolling, Johnny Cash was still soaring after last year's "Live At Folsom Prison" record claimed about every award in sight and set him free. A prison album setting a guy free, who would have thought it?

Why, Bob Dylan's startling but slight burst of "Country Pie" (an actual title!) of his excursion into country music, "Nashville Skyline" had climbed all the way to No. 3. And you could hear "Lay Lady Lay" on the radio any time.

The slight record – it was barely half an hour, Ragtime Country Bob dipping his big toe into the Big Muddy of Country Music – slid down the charts just as quickly. Hammond, sitting at his desk in his office on the 11th floor, wondered what was next. And what he could do about it.

As the final summer of the sixties approached, there was an unsettled feeling from coast to coast. The inspirational leaders – our leaders – were all gone, stubbed out like a cigarette. Martin Luther King, John Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy. They were erased from our lives and our world just as easily as Mick Jagger – then recording "Sympathy For The Devil" – was able to trot into a studio and simply add an "s." – "You shouted out who killed the Kennedy(s.)" Yeah. It was that easy.

On the way into work that morning, Hammond had heard The Fifth Dimension's hit "Let the sun shine? Let the sunshine in?" and wondered, wasn't that really a collective prayer for all of us? Who was going to bring us sunshine? Bob? Maybe Bob Dylan...

Scanning the front page of the New York Times that spring morning, Hammond felt discouraged. Nixon? He was enough to discourage anybody. Helicopters spraying stinging powder at war protesters in California. Race riots. Insanity. It seemed like every day sunk us deeper in the bitter quicksand of Vietnam and political upheaval, yet the music, almost in defiance of all that, was soaring, reaching out, lifting all of America's young people past this crap.

Hammond, who had spent his life in music, loved this idealistic trend. Was it pulling them inexorably towards a future that they could really command. Who could ignite that final, everlasting spark? He looked at a photo of Bob, a young Bob, sitting on the corner of his desk. We need that voice again.

That's what made Hammond call Rachel and place that order. As Hammond sat at his desk, looking over his own well-worn copy of Henry David Thoreau's "Walden," as he had last night, he felt like he had to do something. He had to reach out. The idea of the reclusive Thoreau, boldly addressing the world from that immaculate little cabin out in the Massachusetts woods, that appealed to Hammond. Maybe it would appeal to Bob. Dylan was holed up at Hi Lo Ha, being a family man and all. Which was great. But he had something inside, burning.

Columbia's president Goddard Lieberson tried to inspire Dylan when he was writing what would become "Tarantula." He presented Dylan with a rare first edition of James Joyce's "Ulysses" and never heard a word more about it. Next thing Lieberson knew, Bob was writing country songs.

No, Hammond thought, Bob wasn't going to be a revolutionary, well, not like he was. Not any more. We weren't going to see him draping huge American flags behind his stage set like he did in London and Paris or hear him talk about his tax bracket ("Uncle Sam, he's my uncle! Can't turn your back on a member of the family!")

But wasn't everybody waiting to hear what he thought? Surely, he wasn't going to ignore this ugly Vietnam War. He'd sung about all these injustices so brilliantly before. He could, he should do it again. Maybe he needed a little nudge. Everybody needs a little nudge now and then.

Hammond, of course, knew Bob Dylan could – and would – do as he damn well pleased. When Hammond first heard the acetates of "Skyline" and Bob's high, sweet voice crooning – well, that's really what it was – these expertly crafted but hardly revolutionary tunes, Hammond could only smile.

"Holding pattern," he thought. "He loves Johnny Cash, the two have been hanging around...it's a temporary excursion."

Or so he hoped. There was no question about it, the guy who, just a year or two earlier had seemed to be able to explain or summarize, depict, dramatize or decry any and all of this maelstrom of a world – sometimes in the same verse – was now singing things like "Love to spend the day with Peggy Night." Not touring. The time, Hammond thought, was now.

This Bethel festival, up near Woodstock, this was the platform. Why, just one acoustic set – "Masters Of War," "Hard Rain," "Times They Are A-Changin'" – the whole damn crowd would up and march right down Pennsylvania Avenue and DEMAND CHANGE. End this war. We could correct the path of the country, these kids, these crazy kids. Hell, it was a crazy idea, sure. But in this year of change, it almost seemed like our last chance.

Michael Lang, the kid who was promoting that festival, was going to invite Bob, he'd heard. Lang was supposed to even have a private meeting with him. Hammond wouldn't try that. Too pushy. If the RECORD COMPANY wanted him to do something, encouraged him to do something, even to CONSIDER something, Dylan would run the other way. Thoreau would have loved that about him. He had to try something else.

Her heels clicked on the hardwood floor as she entered John Hammond's office. The room smelled of stale cigarette smoke and Old Spice, or something like that. Hammond was leaning back in his chair, tie flipped over, glasses half-way down his nose, running his hand over his brush cut. When he saw her, he smiled broadly, those eccentrically askew teeth quickly unveiled once more. His voice was flat, soft, inviting.

"Here you are," he said, reaching up to hand her the small yellow envelope.

"Thank you, sir." The floor creaking beneath her, she walked out, turning the envelope over once she was out of his sight. Sealed.

Why would John Hammond want to send a book, an old book at that, out to Hi Lo Ha? She called Crawford Doyle and asked if they had – or could get – a first edition of "Walden," there was a sort of sarcastic chuckle.

"Sure," the voice said. "It's not cheap, though."

"It's for Mr. Hammond."

"Oh, OK. Give me till the afternoon," he said and the phone clicked off.

She got up and walked over to the book cabinet against the far wall. There wasn't much help in old Billboards and music magazines and sheet music. In an old World Almanac, she found something that mentioned the author, Henry David Thoreau. But nothing about the book's sales or even what it was about. It really wasn't any of her business, she knew that. But how could she not be interested in finding out why Hammond would send such an expensive book out to Hi Lo Ha? And Bob

She knew Mr. Hammond had been on the phone quite a bit with Bob Johnston from Nashville in late April, a couple weeks after "Lay Lady Lay." But why "Walden?" Why now?

At lunch, she walked over to The Corner Bookstore – they knew her at Crawford Doyle – and asked about “Walden.” A young employee steered her to a musty corner. She took a copy down off the shelf. She opened, by accident, almost to the end of the book, just like she always did in high school, trying to see how the book would end. The words seemed to spring off the page.

“The surface of the earth is soft and impressible by the feet of men;” she read, “and so with the paths which the mind travels. How worn and dusty, then, must be the highways of the world, how deep the ruts of tradition and conformity!”

Tradition? Conformity. What would that mean at Hi Lo Ha? Marriage? Kids? Escape? This Thoreau character seemed almost radical as he seemed to speak to her from the yellowy pages of this weather-beaten old book. Hi Lo Ha. Was this what Hammond was getting at? Putting Bob Dylan and tradition and conformity in the same sentence?

Thoreau’s hell-bent words had a certain ring to them, even now. She sat in a soft green chair in the corner and continued what looked to be the final chapter. Was this what Hammond was getting at?

“...if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him...and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings.”

A higher order of beings? Isn’t that how Bob lived anyway? Trembling a little bit – this was heavy stuff to consider at lunch – she read on, thinking, as Hammond had, about the slender recluse who climbed down off the zeitgeist to become Mr. Mom.

“In proportion as he simplifies his life,” Thoreau continued, “the laws of the universe will appear less complex and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness. If you have build castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.”

Hi Lo Ha. Dreams. Foundations. Laws of the universe and Castles In The Air. Maybe that’ll be Bob’s next album title. “Castles In The Air,” the long-awaited follow-up to “Nashville Skyline.” She laughed to herself. She was putting the book back on the shelf when they hollered from the front of the store. They would have the book in a day or so, they told her. She walked back to the office thinking about what she had read. *“He will put some things behind...”*

She had on her AM radio back in the office a little while later when “Lay Lady Lay” came on. Strange song. Mr. Hammond walked in just then, taking a little later lunch than usual. He smiled and nodded. “Ah, Bob,” he said, rapping on her desk with his knuckles and walked out. She looked at the yellow envelope again, wondering what was in that note.

It was a few weeks later when Rachel felt a presence at her desk. She was in the middle of typing a letter and when she finished, she turned around and saw Johnny Cash standing there.

“Mr. Hammond wanted to see me,” he said, that pine-pitch resonant voice – all angles – rang around the walls of her office.

“Johnny!” a voice cried out from behind the door. “Come on in.” Almost before Rachel could get up, Hammond was in the doorjamb, a huge smile on his face. “Great to see you. Just great.”

The two men embraced and Rachel stood there for a moment. Seeing Johnny Cash in person, he seemed so, well, regular. Like a guy you’d hire to fix a roof or hook up an icemaker. She’d seen Dylan only once, a wraith wrapped in black sunglasses and cigarette smoke. Cash looked so different to her, she couldn’t get over it. Hammond, in such a rush to greet Cash, immediately beckoned him deeper into the office and didn’t shut the door. Rachel started to go close it but didn’t want to get in the way.

She couldn’t hear all of the talk, just something about the Folsom album. How exciting it was, what a great idea it was to do it in the first place. How do you think San Quentin will work? Did you enjoy working with Bob?

Cash’s voice carried.

"Ain't no one I've ever met like Bob Johnston. That boy is crazier than a shithouse rat," Cash said. "Had fun with him onstage."

Hammond laughed.

"I was introducing a song, telling the inmates that this was going on record and that I couldn't say "shit" or "damn..." Hammond's laughter was rising. "I looked over at him. 'How's that grab you, Bob?' We got it. Don't think that'll make the record."

More laughter.

Hammond said something about "Dylan working with Bob now, too."

"I know," Cash said. "I stopped by the other night at Music Row – and we sang a bunch of my songs, the mikes were all set up for us and all. It was fun."

Mumble. Mumble. Hammond had lowered his voice and she couldn't hear.

"I'm worried, too," Cash said. "How can I help?"

Rachel's ears perked up. Help? HELP? Line 1 lit up. She jammed the button quickly.

"Yes?"

"Rachel, can you bring Mr. Cash and I some coffee?"

She got up and walked down the hall to the coffee machine, heels clicking all the way. She must have been walking faster than usual because two different people she passed in the hall sort of moved out of her way. When she came into the office with the coffee, the two were talking about a festival in Bethel. Not all that far from Hi Lo Ha.

"They're just about holding the damn thing on Bob's lawn," Hammond was saying. "He doesn't need that kind of pressure right now."

Cash was nodding, collapsed into a chair, long legs crossed, foot a-bobbin. He was looking at the floor and seemed surprised when Rachel walked in with the coffee.

"Thank you, Rachel." She smiled at Cash and walked back to her desk. The phone rang. It startled her.

"Mr. Hammond's office... He's in a meeting right now. I can't... I can't interrupt...No...Can I....No. Oh...I understand. Hold please."

"Mr. Hammond, I apologize for interrupting. I have a rather insistent call from a Mr. Johnston from Nashville. He said you had asked him to call?"

"Oh, yes. Yes," Hammond laughed and slapped his leg. "Put him through."

"Bob? Well, I appreciate you calling me right now. It gives me a chance to stop listening to Johnny Cash complaining about his producer."

Much laughter all around.

Cash sat up. "You're damn right. I had to take the damned fool to a prison to get me a hit record. How bad is that?"

Hammond laughed and turned to Cash.

"Johnston says 'It's a wonder they let the son of a bitch out.'"

More laughter.

"You know, I think I can get this on speaker... Rachel..come in here.."

She was up and in there – almost too quickly. She had been listening.

"Service!" Cash laughed. "We sure don't that kind of service up in Nashville."

Rachel walked over to Hammond's desk and pushed a button, then placed the phone beside it. Hammond reached out and touched her arm and whispered.

"Stick around...in case we lose the connection."

Hammond leaned down towards the speaker.

"Bob? Can you hear me?"

Johnston's twang crackled out of the speaker: "Has Cash been arrested yet?"

Laughter.

"Not yet," Hammond said. "It's early though."

"Well, you wanted me to call and talk about how the sessions are going, John. They're going OK, I guess."

“How so?”

“I don’t think Bob knows quite what he wants to do. The other day, he asked me – straight out – what did I think about him recording some other people’s songs? I laughed. I mean, if I’d have suggested that when we were doing Blonde On Blonde, he’d have bitten my head off. Or just walked out and I’d be out of a fucking job.”

“So, what did you tell him?” Hammond asked, listening intently.

“I told him I thought it would be great, if that’s what HE wanted, not because some dickhead suggested it.”

Cash sat up, “Why didn’t you ask him to record an album of MY songs, Bob? I could use the money.”

“Christ, Cash, you don’t have a whole album’s worth of songs,” Johnston said. “You stole one from a god damned inmate to fill out your last album?”

They all laughed. Hammond held the San Quentin album cover up and pointed to the last song “Graystone Chapel” (written by San Quentin inmate Glenn Shirley) and nodded.

“I’d like to get Dylan writing again,” Hammond said softly. “We need him.”

When Cash looked up, Hammond gestured to the old photo of Dylan on his desk. “Not Columbia Records, us.”

Cash nodded.

“Well, he sure was great on my show down at the Ryman,” Cash said. “Nervous as hell like someone was going to jump out of the audience after him. But you know, Bob’s shy about some things. He was in tune, though.”

“He wasn’t for me, Christ,” boomed out of the speaker. “I got McCoy and Buttrey to try and re-work some of the rough tracks and it was a god damn mess. You know you ain’t going to get Take Two out of him.”

Hammond sat up. “Well, Bob, we appreciate all you’re doing to try to help him,” he said. “It’s a rough patch for him. He’s had enough of Albert – well, haven’t we all – and I don’t think he’s feeling real sure about himself.”

He looked over at Rachel and raised a finger to his lips. Then motioned it was OK for her to go. The heels clicked on the wooden floor as she left.

“Thanks again for everything, Bob.” Hammond said, looking across the room at Cash. He pushed the button.

“John, we need to talk,” Hammond said. “Let’s go take a walk.”

The two walked past a newsstand. The newspaper headlines were all Vietnam. Hammond stood and looked at it for a moment, then kept walking.

“You know, John, I’m sorry we didn’t support “Bitter Tears,” Hammond said. “We just didn’t. As a label. I really liked what you were saying and doing. It took courage. Who else would say a word about the Indians?”

“Perhaps I shouldn’t say this – you and I have never spoken about politics – but I always admired how Bob was always on the forefront, politically. He seemed to be able to anticipate what was going to happen or maybe, he wrote it, they made it happen. I’m not precisely sure what came first. But there was a power, a conviction in his writing that seemed to change people...the way they looked at things. It didn’t come from sit-ins and protests and draft card burning but there was an idealism somehow, of what we could be, maybe should be.

“Now, I don’t know how you feel about Vietnam but...”

Cash stopped. “Are you thinking about Bethel? That’s supposed to be a big damned deal..”

Hammond smiled.

“It’s a huge audience,” he said. “Think of the impact a voice like his could have there. Maybe he’s unsure of himself but can you imagine the ovation if – and let’s just say if – he walked out onto that stage unannounced, guitar in hand....? I mean, hell, are we going to look to Country Joe McDonald to speak for all of America’s youth?”

Cash laughed and nodded.

Hammond continued walking – and talking.

“We don’t know how big this festival is going to be – they do have quite an array of stars there.”

“Not me,” Cash laughed. “I ain’t hip enough.”

“They’re not smart enough,” Hammond corrected. “Now, imagine if you and Bob walked out there...

unannounced...just the two of you in similar outfits, carrying acoustic guitars, ready to change the world.”

“Naw, it’d be like a barbecue-flavored fart in church,” Cash said. “Me and Sly Stone and Jimi Hendrix on the same stage. Ol’ Sam Phillips would disown me.”

“What is Sam doing now?” Hammond asked, turning the corner into a stiff summer breeze.

“He just sold Sun,” Cash said. “I think he’s had it with the music business.”

“Wish we could have brought him to Columbia but somehow, I don’t think Sam would flourish in a corporate structure. Sometimes I can’t stand it around here myself.”

Cash laughed. Funny how even the higher up people go, they still chafe against the corporation, the administration, the bosses. Even Hammond doesn’t like his bosses. Is that where America is headed. More bosses, more higher-ups?

“But, you know, John, to continue what we were discussing... I know I shouldn’t say this...but...if Bob walked out there on that Bethel stage, and let’s say, oh just imagine he decides to do this acoustic...and he played “Masters of War” or even “Hard Rain” or “Blowin’ In The Wind” or any of those old powerhouses, why there’d be a revolution, a youth revolution...and, I’m telling you, we’d be out of Vietnam by the end of the year.”

“I agree,” Cash said but added, softly. “It’s hard to imagine him doing that...right now,”

“He really seems to be somewhere else,” he continued. “I tried to talk to him about something I’d read about the war and he was just ‘Leave me out of it.’ He thinks everyone thinks he has “The Answer” or something. He was telling me about the lunatics hounding him, even out at Hi Lo Ha. He’s out in the yard with his kids and they’re driving by or honking the horn or pointing him out wherever he goes.

“I mean, we all have to deal with that shit. I just laugh it off – or try to. But you know Bob. He, you know, he keeps a lot inside. When he did my show, he was nervous as shit. I had to pull a few pranks to loosen him up.”

“Well, I’m worried about him,” Hammond says, stopping to look Cash directly in the eye. “I mean, I sort of feel like his father, in a way. I think he’s sort of stuck right now. He is enjoying a break, loves his kids and his life but there’s an undercurrent there that troubles me a bit. He says that he doesn’t want to be any sort of spokesman, that he’s just a musician, then he comes out with “John Wesley Harding” with these Biblical themes and ideas. The music doesn’t sell that album.”

“But it does on “Skyline,” Cash said, laughing. “It’s that steel guitar.”

“Well, I know he loves you,” Hammond said, “When you stuck up for him that time, on Broadside, you don’t know what that meant to him. I know he’ll listen to you, hell, he needs to listen to you. You’re on top of the world! He just needs to understand that he doesn’t need to do anything but write about his life – as it is. Put his heart on the page, the way Thoreau did. You ever read him?”

“Who?”

“Thoreau? Guy who lived in the woods.”

“I read Khalil Gibran,” Cash said. “June got it for me.”

“Well, I sent Bob a book, his book, Thoreau’s “Walden” for his birthday,” Hammond said. “It’s a diary, really, about a guy who lived his life and didn’t give a shit about anyone or anything that didn’t interest him. I think right now, Bob is trying to please too many people – he’d never admit that, of course. But from what I hear from Johnston...,”

“You can’t believe that asshole,” Cash quipped and the two of them cackled. Mr. Johnston, a Hammond favorite, was a bit of a rogue. You could understand why, a few years later, Dylan would describe him as someone who should show up wearing a cape, brandishing a sword, a guy who lived on “low-country barbecue.”

But Johnston, who worshipped Dylan, once calling him “a prophet” and someone “touched by the Holy Ghost” might not have been the guy to move Dylan in any particular direction. Of course, everybody has ideas for him and Dylan, Johnston would explain later, never exactly says “no” or “yes” – he figures it out on his own then says what he wants to do.

Right now, Hammond was saying to Cash, Dylan was so skittish, he might vanish in an instant and never record again.

“He’s calmed down so,” Hammond said. “I almost wonder if maybe he’s a bit depressed. I know he’s trying to change his life, the smoking, the drugs, the wild pace. It’s a complete turnabout. Almost too much of one, you

know? With this damned war, the assassinations, every day it's something scary out there, he doesn't want to be anyone's target. You can't blame him."

"Hoover probably has a file on him already," Hammond nodded, stopping to light a cigarette. "You, too. You're lucky you got out of Folsom. AND San Quentin."

"We need to do something about these prisons," Cash said. "It's heartbreaking how these men are being treated, John. I mean it. I'm going to do something about that."

"Maybe you can do something about it, Johnny. You should. But...about Bethel, if you can just talk to Bob about it, let him just get out there and feel that love. I think he feels like he has nothing to say or that he'll say the wrong thing or that they'll misinterpret him or ask him to explain his songs or whatever," Hammond said. "But they want to love him. If he walked out there, unannounced, with that Martin...I don't know what would be comparable to that."

"It'd be a helluva sight to see," Cash said, crossing the street back to the CBS building.

"These may just be an old man's dreams," Hammond said as he opened the front door and Cash waved.

"We'll see you later."

"I like the way you think, Mr. Hammond. I do have an idea." Cash said. "Let me get back to you."

Three nights before the actual Woodstock Arts & Music Fair was to begin up near Dylan's Woodstock home, Cash was getting ready for his Saturday night show at the Ryman in Nashville – The Johnny Cash Show – and he caught up with Bob one last time. The music papers were full of rumors about this upcoming festival. The Beatles were going to show up. So were the Rolling Stones and Dylan, why, he lived about 5 minutes away. OF COURSE, he would be there.

Cash knew damn well that wasn't going to happen. Not the way everybody expected it, anyway. Dylan was, as usual, non-committal. Newspapers were after him, was he going to appear, was he going to make a statement. "Yeah, I'd love to spend the day with Peggy Night or spend the night with Peggy Day," he might say, and giggle. Or maybe silence is a better way to handle it. Let 'em wonder.

Cash had asked him straight out. And Dylan hemmed and hawed. "They invited me," he said. "So I guess I could go if I feel like it. Or not go." His words just hung in the air like clotheslines.

So, a couple of nights before John Sebastian would kick things off at that festival before an ever-growing sea of people, Cash and Hammond hatched their plan. It was Cash's idea and Hammond quickly approved. They knew damn well that nobody was going to convince Bob Dylan to walk out onto the stage at Woodstock in front of half a million hippies, yippies, flip-ees and zip-ees. But maybe – and this was Cash's genius - somebody could talk him into NOT playing.

This was the kind of scheme that would live on in rock and roll immortality. The single greatest no-show since Hank Williams missed that New Year's gig a few years back for the most understandable of reasons.

Cash's pitch was different. He and Bob were good friends now. And in some ways, Dylan was really in need of a good friend, someone who wouldn't try to bullshit him. Both of them had been in Nashville's Studio B lately, running into each other, Cash's career seemingly steered by this faraway star, Dylan's sort of under a cloud. So one evening, Cash made his pitch.

Right away, he got Bob laughing. Dylan was sitting in the corner of Studio B by himself, some sheets of paper in front of him with some very small, painstaking handwriting on it. He'd been recording a slew of other people's songs. But he never stopped scribbling.

"Bob, I know you're going to think I'm crazy," Cash said, walking in, laughing. "But I have an idea for the greatest damn prank of 'em all. And I want you to help me."

Dylan looked up. A prank. Hmmm. Interesting.

"Go on," he said.

"Well look," Cash said. "I know they've been up your ass about this Bethel, Woodstock thing coming up,"

"Oh, Jesus...." Dylan said, waving his hand, "don't even start."

"I know, the voice of a generation and it's your generation and all that..."

"MY Generation? Hey, that's Peter Townshend!" Dylan said, pointing a finger at Cash, grinning.

“Right, those are MY PEOPLE, the tie-dyed, long-haired, doped-up, do-nothings..the lost, forlorn, the stupid, the naked...”

“They can HAVE them,” Dylan said. “I don’t want ‘em. Well, maybe some of the naked,”

And the two of them laughed and Cash, a fisherman, felt as if he had a nibble.

“Well, what about THIS idea,” Cash said, sort of chuckling the way he did when he had a good one. “This is so damn diabolical, NOBODY would believe it. I mean, nobody. Shit, if we told Johnston about it, he’d stain his god-damn jeans.”

“They’re probably already stained – barbecue sauce, grease, beer,” Dylan quipped, staring at Cash intently, as if there was really something he wanted to hear. Cash moved in closer and looked into Dylan’s eyes.

“What if you and I do a show – a PRIVATE show – I mean a really private gig...and we record the son of a bitch RIGHT BEHIND THE GODDAMN Woodstock stage, up in the hills. AND THEY DON’T KNOW A THING ABOUT IT?” Dylan looked amazed.

“What?”

Then, like Bob Johnston talked about later, he put his hand on his chin and looked at the wall. Johnston was sitting over in a corner, quietly watching the two of them without saying a word.

“I mean it,” Cash continued. “Columbia has already given me the go-ahead for my next project, whatever I want to do. Hell, I’ve done two PRISON albums...so you think they’re going to mind you and I working together?”

Dylan, arms folded across his chest, hand to chin, was thinking hard. After a minute or two, he spun and asked, “But, like where? We gonna build a campfire or something?”

Cash put his hand up.

“Listen to this. I’ve been running this idea by Mr. Hammond. He’s connected. And when he found out where the main stage was going to be, he hired a couple of carpenters to throw up a nice little wood cottage for us, a nice little place that’ll be ready the last night of the concert. We can sneak in, relax and play for a while, record it and NOBODY will know a thing about it.”

“Right” Dylan was shaking his head.

“Hammond cleared it with Columbia already. I mean, they don’t know how big this festival is going to be – they have quite a lineup, Jimi, Sly, The Who, Janis...”

“Yeah,” Dylan said. “Robbie said The Band is playing there, too. That Lang guy came by and invited me...” And then he shrugged. Dylan seemed somewhere else, like he was really imagining it.

Cash was up and walking around the studio.

“Think about it. What if you and I sneak up there in the middle of the night – they’ll be all tripping and everything...”

“Yeah,” Dylan said, slyly. “I’m sure many of ‘em are going to be saying they saw me anyway,”

“Right,” Cash laughed, getting a stronger sense that Dylan WAS buying in. “You and I can sit there, do a nice little acoustic set – whatever you want – record it and shit, there won’t be a soul in the world who *won’t* wish they were there. Hell, I’d want to buy that record myself.”

“What kinda songs do you want to do?” he said. “I’ve been recording a few of other people’s songs lately, you know.”

“You can do whatever you want. Hammond said so already. And you know, I get how you like to work, Bob. What do you think it was like at Sun? Sam wanted something inspired, something that maybe you hit one time...So we played, had fun, got crazy and found things.”

“Like with Elvis?”

“Well, Elvis, he said, was a little bit different thing. He had to kind of steer that one because nobody was singing country like Elvis did. I mean, he was mapping the territory, kind of, you know. Elvis wasn’t thinking about singing no rock and roll, that’s for sure.”

It was quiet for a moment.

“How do you think Sam would record me?” Dylan asked.

Cash wasn’t expecting that one. Before he could answer, Dylan began to strum his guitar.

“Toooo-morrrow niight, won’t you be with me tonight,” he sang and Cash nodded in recognition.

“Sam cut Elvis on that,” Cash said. “Some Johnson fella?”

“Tommy Johnson,” Dylan corrected. “Not Robert. Sam could have really done something with Robert Johnson. That’s if he didn’t mind bailing him out of jail.”

“He offered to bail me,” Cash said. “Thing about Sam, if there was talent there, he’d do it. Guy was cheap but Jesus, he could see things and envision things. Maybe we should invite Sam. He ain’t working.”

“Would he come?” Dylan asked, suddenly and surprisingly intrigued.

“Sam don’t do nothing he don’t want to,” he said. “But if he heard us together, I bet he’d come.”

“Woodstock Highway. Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash, produced by Sam Phillips! I can see the headline in Rolling Stone Magazine now,” Dylan was excited.

The two of them were laughing and Johnston could see dollar signs. This was going to be something...

“How you gonna keep this quiet?” said Dylan, ever suspicious. “I mean, I can’t take a shit without somebody wanting to paw through it to see if I’m on dope or what I’ve been reading or...”

He was getting wound up. Cash expected it.

“Look....NOBODY knows. Hammond, you and me. Johnston over there, who ain’t doing a thing right now.

Christ, I can get my roadies to set it up for us. We’ll tell ‘em it’s my Counter-Country Album – do my warped-style rock like I did at Sun. They’ll eat it up.”

“You been drinkin?” Dylan laughed.

And Cash knew he had him. Felt the pull on the line, so to speak.

“You know...I gotta say, I gotta admit, it’s a great idea,” Dylan said with genuine enthusiasm and surprise and delight. “Won’t that piss those fucking hippies off....think what they MISSED.”

Cash just smiled.

John Hammond had been at work on his end. He loved Thoreau and knew Bob would fall in love with his singularity, his vision and his independence if he started “Walden.” You couldn’t rush through that book. E.B. White called it “indigestible.” That was a good word. It was just the kind of book, Hammond figured, would inspire Bob, would get him excited about his work, his vision. Thoreau would get under his skin. He just felt it. Once Hammond found out the site of the Bethel Festival, he hired two carpenters to construct a small Walden Pond replica house back out in the woods, way out behind the stage. He couldn’t make it the precise size – that would be too small. But it was proportional. And he made sure the only thing that Dylan and Cash would find in there was a drum. A single drum. To echo Thoreau’s famous quote about a guy not keeping up with his companions “because he hears the sound of a different drum.”

Commerce was part of it, sure. But Columbia was in a good place, as strong as the label had been in years. This was time, maybe THE time, to step in a different direction. Maybe the right artist, the right set of songs, the air was filled with this kind of talking, thinking anyway, if only someone could gather it all...

And the more Hammond thought about it, wondered how Dylan would feel as he heard the sounds of the Bethel show would waft over the forest, a rich, explosive tapestry of sound cloaking a cabin where inside, even more powerful, secret, mystical sounds were emerging, surging up out of the earth, a real Earth Day.

Yet at the same time, none of them, none of those half a million kids, not a single one, would know where Bob Dylan was AT THAT MOMENT! Or hear him. And when they found out what they had missed later on...the furor would be unbelievable.

“We coulda seen DYLAN? What kind of crap is that? He was THERE?”

In a way, Hammond thought, there was something perfect about this. They didn’t REALLY listen to Dylan, or maybe didn’t appreciate him like they should have or VALUED him – that’s the word, value. Because Dylan’s VALUE to music, to teen-agers, adults, America alike was that he wanted, maybe even expected his audience to listen.

That was what he found so great in England. You could see it on the “Don’t Look Back” tour. He stepped out into that spotlight, onto those stages of those old music halls and it was silent. Utterly silent. They came to listen. When an artist, a sensitive, plugged-in artist like Dylan senses that, he delivers.

That was why, a year later, when a disillusioned (and sadly mistaken) fan reached the breaking point and shouted the most famous cat call in rock history “Judas!” you could hear him, in Chuck Berry’s famous phrase “like he was ringing a bell.”

Now, with the biggest and most transformative musical festival of all time about to be blaring on just a few feet away, the counterculture’s greatest hero would be offering a new tune, several of ‘em, actually, just out of their reach. How delightful!

When the helicopter landed quietly in the woods, having flown over the entire Woodstock expanse, Dylan was smiling. He was above all the mud, the mess, the absolute sea of people below, literally and figuratively, the place looked like a huge city of tie-dyed ants. The Woodstock Generation. The hippies. His people. Looked like they needed a shower not more free love.

As the helicopter touched down, Dylan was excited. He walked towards the cabin, carrying his Martin 0-18 acoustic guitar and a small notebook and, as he crunched through the woods, snapping twigs that Natty Bumpo had to hear, he felt like he was getting away with something. Something exciting, almost like a James Bond mission.

Cash was already inside with Johnston. As Dylan pulled at the door of the cabin, he could hear their laughter. This was going to be fun.

Though it was 90 degrees and had been rainy, it was dark and cool inside the wooden cabin, a few small, quiet fans in either corner stirring the air around. The high-backed chairs were wood – all wood – and turned so that Cash, near the door, and Dylan could face each other when they sang.

Johnston, who had recorded both of them before, had everything miked perfectly. On just the little sample playback he did with Cash just prior to Dylan’s arrival – Cash did an acoustic version of a song he and Bob wrote together - “Wanted Man” - there was something fundamental there in that space, something real and honest that seemed to cut through the heart of a generation of excesses happening just a few hundred feet away. The sound was great. It seemed to be coming out of the Earth.

There wasn’t going to be any studio trickery, or overdubs and or take sixes. Sgt. Pepper’s my ass. What could these two giants generate with minimal accompaniment? What sound would emerge, Johnston, who always said Dylan had a different voice for every album, was anxious to find out.

Dylan stood in the doorway, taking it all in. He saw that the trusty old Ampex 602 tape recorder, the one Garth Hudson had used to record The Basement Tapes, was also set up, ready to go whenever Johnny and Bob started. Dylan spotted it when he opened the door and smiled liked he was greeting an old friend.

“Is this gonna be as big as Folsom?” Dylan giggled as he stood in the doorway and saw Cash approaching him with a smile and a big oatmeal cookie.

“If Johnston doesn’t fuck it up,” Cash thundered in that rich baritone, looking at Johnston, sitting over by the cookies, his feet up.

“Just us?” Dylan asked, walking over where Johnston was.

“Yup,” Johnston said in his best high-pitched, ‘you wanna make something of it’ twang. “Shit, nobody wants to play with a pair of *protest* singers.”

Dylan laughed and Cash threw the rest of his cookie at Johnston.

“It’s up to y’all,” Johnston said. “I’m just gonna turn on the fucking tape recorder and eat oatmeal raisin cookies. These sumbitches are good!”

“You know what we should do?” Dylan said, climbing up into the chair. “We should each do each other’s favorite songs. Together.”

“Like ‘Johnny Cash Sings The Bob Dylan Songbook?’ Cash said, gently hinting at his current status as THE world’s biggest music star. “That would hit the charts?”

“Yeah,” Dylan said, giggling, thinking of the royalties an album like that would bring. “Except I’ll pick the songs for you. We’ll start with ‘Sad-Eyed Lady’”

"I could sing that song," Cash said, "Sad-eyed lady of the LOOOOOOOOWlands" letting his bass voice almost drop below the range of human hearing."

"Really," Dylan said. "It'd be fun. And we know the words,"

"Speak for yourself," Cash said. "And you get a huge break there, Bob. Christ, I only *know* 47 words. And that don't include shit and damn. Forty-seven words? That's verse one for Bob Dylan!"

Johnston, sitting up straight, applauded.

"Let's do it," he said. "What do you want to start with?"

Dylan began to strum, "Well...I taught the weeping willow how to cry..." He stopped. "You know, that's a great line. I wish I wrote that."

Cash, flattered, smiled and nodded. Then he began to sing himself, "Well, it ain't no use to sit and wonder why, babe?..."

"You did that already," Dylan said. "Let's make it songs we haven't done before."

Cash shrugged. "OK by me."

"Maybe it should be songs that we think the OTHER guy ought to sing," Johnston piped in.

"Christ, give me a chance, Johnston," Cash said. "I have about 40 songs, he has 400."

"Well, get off your ass then," Dylan said, eyeing Cash. "We got all night."

The two of them looked at each other and began to laugh.

"Tiny," Johnston said, chewing on another cookie. "Do Tiny, Bob. Johnny could do that one"

A Basement Tapes song, "Tiny Montgomery" was obscure all right. But with Garth Hudson's swirling organ, Dylan's rockin' on the front porch vocal...it was a Basement Tapes song that was so friendly, so inviting, to downright neighborly, it was mesmerizing. It was community.

"How's it go?" Cash asked. And Dylan started to sing in his not-quite Nashville Skyline, warm and sharp and friendly voice, "You can tell everybody down in ol' Frisco, Tiny Montgomery says hello..."

Two hogs, a buzzard and a crow, tell 'em all Montgomery says hello..." He finished the song.

"You wrote that?" Cash asked? "I can sing that!"

"Show me," Dylan cracked, laughing again. And Cash, flipping through the lyrics, began reciting the lyrics out loud, just about laughing at each line. And when he got to the line "Tell 'em all Montgomery says hello." Dylan and Johnston looked at each other and smiled. This was going to work.

It was as if that song's hello was a benediction, a special blessing that would mean the world to whomever it was directed to, a call to a real community, not a bunch of drugged up, tie-dyed space cadets running full-tilt from society, the real world, life. This was deeper, real and tangible. And in Johnny Cash's varnished voice, those words would sound like they tumbled down the side of a mountain.

Cash thought it was perfect. It only took a few moments to get the rhythm down – Cash learned that from Sam, you had to have the right tempo. "He was a tempo maniac" he told Dylan. Then once he started and hit it just right, the song flowed out of him, Dylan alternating verses, the two of them barely containing their delight at being able to work together.

"Wanna listen back?" wondered Johnston, obviously excited.

"Naw, let's get a few down, then we will," Dylan said. Cash looked at Johnston and winked. And the session began.

"What else you got from them? You did those with The Band, right?"

"Well, no Levon for most of it, but yeah," Dylan said, fingering his guitar. "At Big Pink, at my place, it was fun. Johnny, try this one..."

"Everybody's building ships and boats," Dylan began to sing in his best "You don't – and won't – ever know if I really MEAN this" Nashville Skyline voice, tapping his foot. "...you'll not see nothing but The Mighty Quinn..."

Cash laughed out loud. "Love it! I love it!"

Johnston kept the tape running the whole time, catching the playful banter between the two as they ran down an impressive run of songs, some by Dylan, some by others, even some old Sun cuts. It was quite a song list:

- "All-American Boy"

- “Belchazzar”
- “I Forgot To Remember To Forget”
- “Girl From The North Country”
- “Mama, You’ve Been On My Mind”
- “One Too Many Mornings”
- “I Don’t Hurt Anymore”
- “Tomorrow Night”

They were having so much fun, Johnston was loving everything they did. He did what a good producer should do when things are flowing – shut up. The two guitars were in tune, both players adapted quickly to covering the songs themselves – they were used to backup bands, of course. But the sound between the two, the light and chiaroscuro Dylan voice and the deep-pitched Cash rumble, blended surprisingly well and the affection between the two, even in mid-song was apparent.

“I’m right from my side, you know, Bob” Cash sang on “One Too Many Mornings” “I know it, Johnny,” Dylan responded, a smile creeping across his face as they sat before the mikes. It seemed so unusual to see Dylan smiling in the studio.

The two decided to take a break. They walked outside and, off in the distance at the Woodstock Festival, could hear the sounds of Johnny Winter’s snarling electric guitar wailing into the New York night. Cash, smoking a cigarette, Dylan looking out into the night, listening to the sounds way off in the distance, began to laugh.

“We’ve got some good cuts,” he said. “We shoulda done some of these on your show.”

Cash smiled. “Well, you can always come on again, you know...”

Tapping his foot, looking at the ground, Dylan nodded. Then looked up. There was noise coming through the woods.

Trudging through the woods, here came Robbie Robertson and Levon Helm from the darkness. Beers in hand, a six-pack of Genessee each, here came Rick Danko and Richard Manuel with Garth Hudson, looking up absently at the stars, in tow.

“Doin’ some recording?” Levon quipped. “I hear you could use a hand?”

That god damn Johnston, Cash thought. He thinks of everything.

After exchanging hugs and greetings, Robertson looked straight at Dylan and shook his head.

“We need to make some noise,” Robertson said. “I feel like I just played a bar mitzvah.”

Dylan did a double take

“What are you talking about, Robbie?” Dylan laughed.

“At this Woodstock Festival deal. Christ, they put us on between Alvin Lee and Ten Years After – he was speeding and Jesus, he was all over the guitar and, well, you can probably hear him off in the distance, Johnny Winter and his blasting Texas blues,” Robertson said.

“Compared to them, we were, well, Richard said just call us “The Choirboys.”

“Damn, I felt like we didn’t even have the amps turned on,” Levon said. “Not how we wanted it.”

Johnston, who had masterminded this surprise visit to coincide with when he figured that Cash and Dylan would be taking a break, was just tapping his feet. This was going to be something. He knew The Band wanted to keep playing...and now Dylan and Cash were ready to resume...wow.

Johnston hurriedly got their equipment set up while Cash and Robbie talked with Levon and the rest of the crew. He put out some more cookies and beer and told the engineers to keep everything running. It was a good call.

Once inside, Dylan put on an electric guitar and yelled over to Levon.

“Let’s show Johnny how he should have done “Folsom,” and with Robertson’s lead – they had played this during The Basement Tapes, they soared into a faster, more rhythmic version of the Cash classic. It was

different not hearing the clipped-clop backing of the Tennessee Two but the song was still cool. Cash was nodding his head and smiling as Dylan snarled out the words.

"It's a different song," Cash said.

And they were off, running through all sorts of songs, Dylan singing, Cash singing, harmonizing with The Band. It was a magical night. As Johnston wrote down the songs on the chart sheet, he could hardly believe the titles he was writing down, never mind what he was listening to.

- "Big River"
- "Train Of Love"
- "I Don't Believe You" – with Cash singing it, slyly, like someone who'd had his fill of groupies and one-night flings.
- "Obviously Five Believers" with Cash singing the last verse "Yes, I could make it without you...if I did not feel so all alone..."
- "Wanted Man"
- "Promised Land"
- "Nadine"
- "Slippin' And A Slidin'"
- "Tombstone Blues" with Cash intoning the chorus "Mama's in the factory, she ain't got no shoes..."
- "I Shall Be Released" with all of them singing harmony.
- "I Still Miss Someone" – same thing.
- "Get Rhythm" – everybody was clapping and loving it.

Then Cash had an idea.

"Bob...what do you think about this...let The Band start with the intro to "Like A Rolling Stone" – you know that dramatic, hard-charging beginning, then, as the first verse comes in, let it get real quiet, I mean, really clear out the air, then let the voice come in...and I'll talk the first line like a damn country preacher.

"Once upon a time, you dressed SO fine, didn't you?"

The Band – and Dylan – looked around at each other. Now, this would be cool.

"Bob, you come in on the second verse," Cash said, "and we'll go that way until the final verse where we'll take turns singing the "How does it feel?" part...until everybody goes nuts."

Dylan was smiling, as if he had an inside secret cooking.

"Sounds great, Johnny. Let's do it."

With Garth Hudson kicking it off, the song had never sounds more magisterial, more powerful, more imposing and exciting. Johnston was standing up, directing each of The Band's dramatic flourishes, even though nobody was paying any attention to him.

"How does it feeeeeeeeeeeel?" Dylan sang...

"How DOES it feel?" Cash sang...

"How does it feel" they both sang into the night. Johnston just made sure the tape kept running.

Back at Columbia Studio A in Nashville the next night, Johnston sat back and listened to all he had in a room by himself. He kept laughing and smiling. Great songs, great spirit, a great sampling of the best of each guy, delivered with sass and subtlety and artistry. And to think, not one soul of those half a million tie-dyed kids knew anything about it. They thought Woodstock was big, was monumental. Wait until they hear this. This was the one that got away. This is the one that they'll really want to LISTEN to. That was the thing. Get them to listen.

On Monday morning in New York, when Rachel came into the 11th floor office, there was a package on Hammond's desk. It smelled like wood. When Hammond came in and picked it up, he seemed surprised and excited, all at once. She heard him unwrap it, then open his cassette player and click it in.

The lone voice, the peeling harmonica, the lone guitar floated out of Hammond's office and drifted down the hall.

“Build your castles in the air and build ‘em high, too many people don’t even wanna try.....the highways of the world are crammed and jammed, people goin’ nowhere for no reason. It’s a brand new world, a brand new season...You know what’s right, you know what’s wrong. Find that beat, that different drum...never mind the rest, you might be the one...”

She couldn’t make out all the words but that was OK. The message came through. It was no country song. John Hammond was drumming on his desk. She could hear the cassette player rewinding.