



Drawing Conclusions, Repeating Quotations  
Vol 7 No 1 May 24<sup>th</sup> 2021

**May you have interesting and stimulating conversations, may you have secret resources and, above all, may you stay forever young**

These past fourteen months or so, I have been admittedly suffering house arrest but I have been extremely lucky. Mostly I have spent a great deal of quality time with my wife, who I started dating when we were young teenagers. I won't speak for her but you know, don't you, that it's been a very long, long time since I was a teenager.

I have also had the special privilege to have been having many conversations with thoughtful, deep thinking and inspiring people virtually for work and pleasure. I have moreover fund myself actively re-engaging with my extended and far-flung family in weekly clan calls that has ranged over several continents and multiple time zones. These friends and family generously share their thoughts with me, challenge mine, bring fresh perspectives to age old issues and new dilemmas, and often just sit down with me to chat about life, the universe and everything.

I must confess though, that I've had two other great special bulwarks of inspiration to help me through lockdown and isolation. Firstly, I have been indulging in some wild and wacky weird conversations with my Great Grand Father. It's not, of course, that he knows or cares a fig about the nuanced and finely tuned arguments I proffer to his recalcitrant mindset. He doesn't know me from Adam. It's difficult persuade him about much because, incidentally, he's dead and can't talk back. Comprehension was never his strong suit, and our daily discourse is encumbered by the fact that his English is severely limited, and my Italian somewhat rudimentary and lacks adequate invective vocabulary. I will write more about this discourse in due time but suffice to say, for now, that Great-Grandad is very accomplished at bemoaning his fate and his inability to take-in much of what is happening is one of the things I'm trying to fathom: I keep saying to him: "Something is happening" Granddad, "but you don't know what it is- do you?" I'm struggling with the intimate confessional diaries he wrote between 1882 and 1895 in Gojjiam, Eritrea, Shoa and Hararghe and I am grappling with the fact that the dead can't answer you back.

**Bob Dylan in Ethiopia: The Pandemic Blues Again**

My second source of solace during the voluntary and involuntary lockdowns has been the daily conversations, again somewhat one-sided, with my obsession: the words and

music of Bob Dylan. There have not been many days in the last fifty-four years that I have not had the words and music of Bob Dylan pulsing through my head. I first met Bob when I was twelve years old in Addis Abeba in 1967. My brother Ron had bought back Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits with him hot off the UK's record shelves back to Addis. I was utterly transfixed, enthralled and hooked for life. Just one look (listen). That's all it took. A follower for ever.

Since that electric encounter. He has been the constant soundtrack to my life, inside my head at important moments and at every milestone or important shift in my life. He accompanied me to boarding school, sustained me in racist encounters, comforted me, warmed me beside coughing heatpipes, lulled me to sleep, taught me to channel my anger and improved my vocabulary. He was with me during fieldwork in Sardinia, alongside me in countless anthropological seminars, reverberating and strangely calming inside my brain during frightening near-crash plane rides, held my mental state when I grappled with grieving and shocked parents and dying children during the famine. He's been paraphrased and quoted in most of the speeches and lectures I've given, blogs, presentations and papers I've written. I have even painted songs of his, compiled playlists for friends, played him literally on every long distance journeys I have made and, to my chagrin, force-fed him to guests, family and my long suffering children and grandchildren.

I'm not, however, I hasten to explain, a "hard core" Dylan fan. This may seem impossible for some people to understand because I own every record, have memorised most of the songs, read many of the books. I have remained a loyal fan, even during the worst moment when I heard him perform at the Live-Aid Concert in Philadelphia in 1985. I say "heard" even though I was actually right there on the spot, having been flown from Addis Abeba to New York to be on stage myself to give some amazing young New York Queens kids some gifts from the Children of Northern Shoa who were on stage to sing "We are the World". I wanted to stay in the VIP area backstage where I had already seen Mick Jagger and Tina Turner as we waited for Dylan to arrive but my boss wanted to leave the concert early and so I very reluctantly left with him to end up looking for his car (he had forgotten where he had parked it) and we were still looking for it well after the concert had ended. We eventually only found the wretched car as the parking area started emptying and at least half of the audience had left. It wasn't a great performance though, and I was told by friends that I had not missed anything. Even then though, Dylans discordant rambling issued from the Sabe stage found their way into my head. He suggested somewhat clumsily that some Live Aid money might be better directed at American farmers that were having a hard time. Whilst hearing this was deeply upsetting, it helped me recalibrate and assimilate the fact that people see things from different points of view. I'll let you be in my dream. If I can be in yours! Even better, a couple of years later, a good friend who heard that I had missed out on that concert, obtained for me an exclusive ticket. So I attended a concert in a group that included a Dylan expert (a biographer who will remain nameless and who has since become very much one of the ten or so "go to" persons about all things Dylan) to a "Supper Club" intimate performance in which Dylan was simply sublime!

I hesitate, nevertheless, to describe myself as a hard corer fan because there are other fans out there that really are. I have encountered them only once in real life and several times online. Frankly, they scare me. I have often wondered, especially in recent months, whether the world needs another Dylan book but I sometimes think a book about what I think of as "The Dylan loonies" – along the lines of "Tony Horwitz's: Confederates in the Attic" which educated us about the extreme hardcore civil-war reenactors in a way that prepared me at least MAGA long before Trump.

In my defence I have never, not once, pretended to know what the songs mean or to interpret them. I have no patience for the adulation. I would suspect Dylan has little time for that himself. I find it odd that fans can get insulted by a change of lyric or delivery rather than be inspired by it and I have absolutely no interest in scrutinising his waste-bins, his lyrics or indeed his spoken words for hidden meanings. Things are complicated enough and I have found that the pithy lines and different deliveries are part of the magic – they become relevant at different moments and will “speak to you” if you let them, because they are polysemic, emotional and contextual.

Enough said, today, on his 80th birthday, I have received many emails from friends around the world alerting me to the plethora of articles about him. So this then, is my humble attempt to acknowledge my deep gratitude and to say Happy Birthday to Bob Dylan myself. It just happens that today is the day I am officially inoculated against covid so it's a poem that is composed entirely of some of titles of Bob Dylan's songs: You are invited to read it as a poem, or you can go one better and think of it as a lockdown playlist and listen to it in sequence, or not. Or better yet, just to go the source and make your very own. H A P P Y B I R T H D A Y, BOB! Thank you for the Music & the journey. Here is aMay it never end.

## You took my breath away (Pandemic Blues)

On a night like this

Nowhere to go

Crossing The Rubicon

I contain Multitudes

Let's just keep it between us

Legionnaire's disease

It has a Licence to kill

We're knocking on heaven's door

Tell me

Tell me, Momma

Just tell me it isn't true

Tears of rage

Too much of nothing

Talking devil

The devil has been busy

Time to end the masquerade

You can take it or leave it

Vomit express

Wiggle Wiggle

Time passes slowly

Seven days

Silent weekend

What's going on here?

Seven deadly sins

Seven curses

Tomorrow is a long time

Touchy situation

Are you ready?

Can't wait?

Why do you have to be so frantic?

Another cup of coffee?

Don't think twice

Seeing the real you at last

I feel a change coming on

If dogs run free

Lock your Door

Something is burning baby

Tell old Bill,

Tell the truth one time

Tempest,

I'm troubled and I don't know why

We better talk this over

What's going on here?

When the deal goes down

Born in time

Living on borrowed time

You ain't going anywhere

Everything is broken

You took my breath away

I can't make it alone

One more cup of coffee

That's the breaks....

I've made up my mind to give myself to you