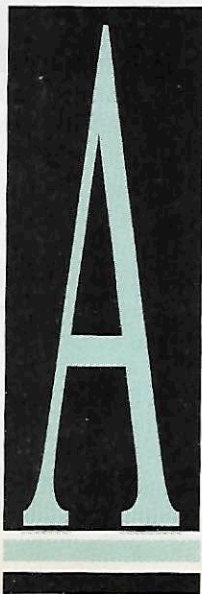


# BOBFEST: BRINGING IT ALL BACK TO DYLAN

*He's a pop-culture icon who gave the 1960s counterculture an attitude, a look and a song, "The Times They Are A-Changin'," that became the anthem of a new generation. Thirty years later, a host of celebrities gathered to pay homage to rock's greatest bard.*

BY LARRY JAFFEE

GLOBE PHOTOS



According to rock'n'roll legend, the Beatles were holed up in a Manhattan hotel room sometime in August 1964 when the journalist Al Aronowitz introduced them to Bob Dylan for the first time. At the height of Beatlemania, it seemed that the Fab Four—already accustomed to pill-popping to keep one step ahead of the thousands of screaming teenyboppers in miniskirts who followed them wherever they went—had never gotten around to trying the old demon weed. Beatle manager and chaperone Brian Epstein, also a dope virgin at the

time, explained to Dylan that he and the boys hadn't actually smoked marijuana. Bob, all of 23 then, found this hard to believe. After all, he inquired, didn't the chorus of "I Want to Hold Your Hand" go: "I get high, I get high, I get high!" John politely corrected him that the correct lyric is "I can't hide...."

In any case, Dylan quickly produced a freshly rolled joint, as the lads anxiously awaited their first toke. Dylan handed it to John, who, after examination, passed it to Ringo, his "royal tester." The diminutive drummer lit up, and they all joined in shortly thereafter.

Two years after turning on the Beatles, Dylan advised an entire generation that "everybody must get stoned...." with his unlikely 1966 hit "Rainy Day Woman #12 & 35" (it was banned by radio stations throughout the country).

Fast forward to Oct. 16, 1992 at the Mexican-villa motif stage of Madison Square Garden where Dylan, 51 years young, is joined by fellow rock legends George Harrison, Eric Clapton, Neil Young, Lou Reed and Stevie Wonder, to name a few of the several dozen talents congregated to celebrate Dylan's 30th anniversary with Columbia Records. Young appropriately dubs the four-hour tribute concert of exclusively Dylan music "BobFest." Tom Petty's rendition of "Rainy Day Women," still a cornerstone of Dylan's concert sets, is the only Dylan song of the 39 played that gets the 20,000-strong crowd off their asses communally chanting the chorus.

When Bob finally makes his appearance, dapperly dressed in what could have been a Mexican bullfighter's tuxedo, the walking enigma looks genuinely touched by the reception although would probably like to get it over with as soon as possible.

On stage for a mere 20 minutes, the healthy-looking Bob is a man of few words: "Hello everybody" and "Thanks everybody," in great contrast to his rambling, apparently alcohol-induced "Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award" acceptance speech ("My daddy once told me...") in January 1991.

"He looked great," offers former HIGH TIMES editor Larry "Ratso" Sloman, who made the backstage scene. "I was amazed. It was such a festive mood backstage. For twenty years, I've been backstage at rock concerts, and usually it's like predators, sharks fucking swimming around in water. It wasn't like that at all. It really had the feel of a reunion or a picnic. It really was a great vibe."





*When informed of the 30th anniversary tribute concert in his honor, Dylan reportedly quipped: "Oh no, it sounds like going to my own funeral." From left: Roger McGuinn, G.E. Smith, Bob Dylan, Duck Dunn, Eric Clapton and Neil Young.*

comments Sloman, who spent time hanging out with Dylan. How does one hang out with Dylan and what did he think of all the fuss? "How do you talk to anyone else? He's a tremendously gifted, intelligent, funny guy. He's very humble and very spiritual. He had to be moved by all those people paying homage to him, some of the most famous musicians in the world."

Kris Kristofferson, who performed at the mega-gig and introduced Sinead O'Connor for the evening's biggest distraction (more on that later), tells *HIGH TIMES*: "Dylan was probably the biggest reason I became a songwriter. He changed the rules for everybody. He lifted songwriting to an

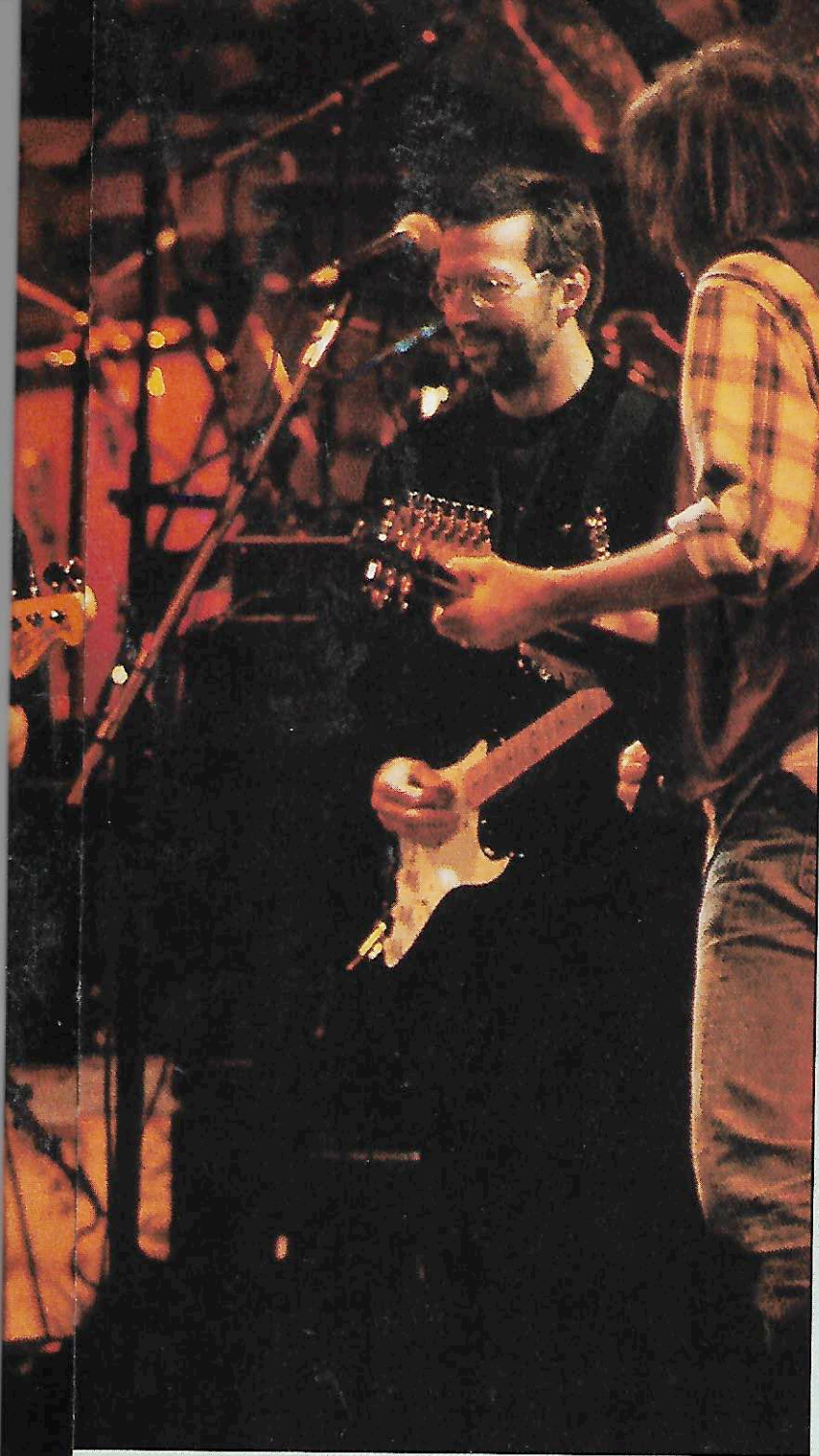
art form. He's one of the most powerful, creative artists of my lifetime and he affected all artists: painters, poets, filmmakers."

Kristofferson agrees with Sloman's description of the backstage scene. "Everybody seemed to be in such a humble state. Everybody was just glad to be there."

**"IF I EVER BECAME WHAT YOU WANTED ME TO BE..." from "Shooting Star" (1989)**

For a guy who hasn't had a hit album or single since the mid-70s, Dylan still strikes a responsive chord with a significant segment of the rock-listening population who hang onto





LARRY BUSACCA/RETNA

his every word. While he may not appeal to a mass audience any longer, there's a fascinating subculture and cottage industry built around the Dylan legend. Fervent fans congregate to hold Dylan conventions, hip academics analyze his lyrics, and bootleggers illegally churn out literally hundreds of his performances on vinyl and compact discs to a niche market of completists that must have everything the guy has ever recorded.

Some 100 biographies have been written about Dylan, far more than any other rock star. There are several regularly published fanzines on both sides of the Atlantic that record every Dylan fact, untruth and piece of trivia; not to mention the 24-hour telephone hotline to catch the latest Dylan news, the mail order catalog of overpriced memorabilia and the online computer service on which cyberDylanists can argue

back and forth about the true meaning of their favorite lyric. An ultra-rare copy of his album *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* fetches \$35,000. And let's not forget the Annual Bob Dylan Imitators Contest at Greenwich Village's Speakeasy, which this past July celebrated the event's 11th anniversary, caught for posterity by a documentary film crew.

So why all the attention for this not-with-the-times geezer who's physically held up pretty well? Still thin as a rail. No signs of balding or greying. Sure, the lines on his face can tell stories, but what a life he's had. Ratso calls it his "mystification."

He's a pop-cultural icon that gave the '60s counterculture an attitude (don't trust authority), a look (Rayban shades and black leather jacket) and hair (fuck the Vitalis generation and "clean cut" parts on the side). Dylan has influenced virtually every rock musician in one way or another. He showed that it was all right to let out a song even if one wasn't blessed with pure pipes. (Jimi Hendrix cited Dylan as an inspiration to start singing instead of just being a guitar player.) As rock's most prolific songwriting machine, Dylan's output over the past three decades is unmatched. There are thousands of cover versions of Dylan compositions recorded by the likes of everyone from Hendrix to William Shatner. Of course, Dylan's vocal style appeals to the nonmusician in all of us. Do you know anyone who doesn't enjoy imitating Dylan's nasal twang, whether or not they like him?

While he's widely credited for being the first to put substance in rock lyrics, Dylan still can turn a phrase better than anyone. Witness this simple line from his 1989 album *Oh Mercy* that speaks volumes about the human condition: "I don't even care if I ever see her again...most of the time..." Given the causes behind last year's Los Angeles riots, the meaning of Dylan anthems like "Blowin' in the Wind," "The Times They Are A Changin'," "Like A Rolling Stone" and "I Shall Be Released" are still relevant today. He earned politically correct points for playing "Masters of War" at the Grammy Awards two years ago during the height of the Gulf War.

Furthermore, Dylan has been omnipresent since launching the "Never-Ending Tour" in 1988, since then performing 100-150 concerts annually. A Dylan concert, as attendees well know, can be a hit-or-miss affair. On a bad night, he mumbles as if he's just going through the motions in an exercise of self-parody. But when he's on, accompanied by a crack band, there's little in rock'n'roll that's as potent as Dylan lyrics piercing through to the heart of the matter, whether that be the war between the sexes or classes.

Dylan's impact upon pop culture showed up last October when the titles of two of his songs ("Subterranean Homesick Blues" and "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall") were dropped within 15 minutes of each other on two back-to-back CBS sitcoms *Love and War* and *Northern Exposure*. And the Dylan legend certainly was the parodied inspiration behind Tim Robbins' movie last summer *Bob Roberts*, about a conservative folk singer who's elected a senator and puts out albums like *The Freewheelin' Bob Roberts* and *Bob On Bob*.

Reports from the road on Dylan's latest tour dates dispatch that he's in top form, still finding new life in songs that he wrote 20 to 30 years ago. Dylan, who's already a grandfather, best represents a rock-generation musician who can remain a vital recording and performing artist rocking into his "mature" years without being delegated to the oldies' circuit (e.g., Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis).



**“AH, BUT I WAS SO MUCH OLDER THEN, I’M YOUNGER THAN THAT NOW...” from “My Back Pages” (1964)**

The son of an appliance dealer in a small Minnesota town known as Hibbing, young Robert Zimmerman, as he was then known, knew there must be more to life than what the puritan Eisenhower years had to offer. Brought up in a good Jewish middle-class home, Zimmerman was perceived to be a brainy but shy kid who, unbeknownst to everyone else, had an alter-ego bursting to get out. That persona came alive at a high school dance when he led a trio rocking out to “Tutti Frutti.” His parents, teachers and even classmates weren’t sure it was the same kid.

Although he started out electric, he felt more comfortable in the country/folk blues idiom, soaking up everything he could on Hank Williams, Woody Guthrie and Odetta. The beat literature of Jack Kerouac, social commentary of Lenny Bruce and punk magnetism of James Dean further made an impression on the budding legend who would soon change his surname to “Dylan,” not as an homage to the poet Dylan Thomas, but rather because he liked the sound of it.

Armed with Guthrie’s autobiography, Dylan decided to chuck college after a few months at the University of Minnesota (he lived in the Jewish frat dorm), playing coffeehouses in the Minneapolis bohemia known as “Dinkytown.”

Hitchhiking to New York in search of fame and fortune, Dylan, looking like a ragamuffin, was determined to meet Woody Guthrie who was already hospitalized. Well familiar with the Guthrie songbook, Dylan would play Guthrie’s songs at the dying folkie’s bedside.

Arlo Guthrie recalled in a 1992 *Sing Out* interview that “Dylan showed up at our place in 1961. I was about 13. We had a girl who was watchin’ over my brother, sister and I, who didn’t know what to make of this guy. He looked about the same he does now, except younger. Still had sort of wild, frizzy hair, which in those days, nobody else had. Just looked very strange and very weird, and asked to see my dad. We told him he was at the hospital over in New Jersey. He stayed a few minutes, and showed me how to play harmonica inside out. Then he took off.”

At his first Greenwich Village gigs, Dylan’s repertoire mostly consisted of folk standards, as did his 1962 debut album. He started mixing in his startling originals like

“Don’t Think Twice” and “A Hard Rain’s A Gonna Fall” in the smoky clubs and unleashed them in 1963 on his second record *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*. Hailed as the boy wonder among folk circles, Dylan impressed traditional folkies like Pete Seeger.

Invited in May 1963 to perform on the “Ed Sullivan Show,” Dylan balked when they refused to let him play “John Birch Society Blues.” A few months later, the Peter, Paul and Mary cover of “Blowin’ in the Wind” hit number two.

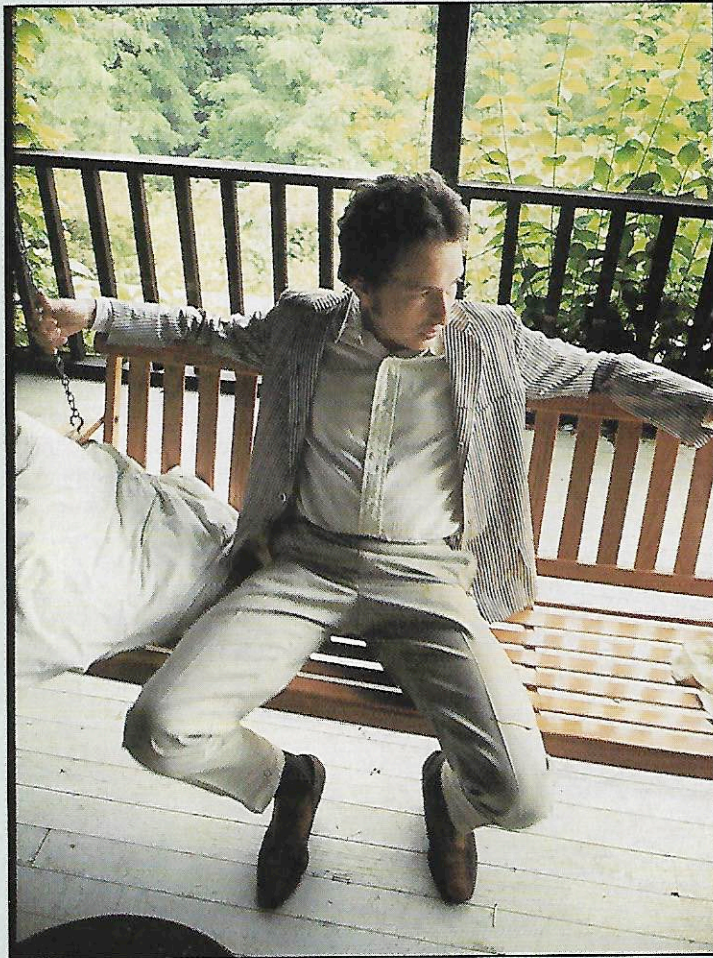
Bob Fass, who would later become a disc jockey on the noncommercial radio station WBAI-FM, used to play poker with Dylan around this time. “He was great and always won [at poker],” says Fass. At one of those get-togethers, they found out that Kennedy had been killed. According to Fass, Dylan was devastated by the news and stated: “They’re trying to tell you you don’t even hope to change things.”

It’s no accident that Dylan’s next album was called *The Times They Are A-Changin’*. Recorded in September and October of 1963, it was released two months after the assassination and featured songs about civil rights and social injustice. The next record (*Another Side of Bob Dylan*) mostly featured tunes about relationships with the opposite sex (“All I Really Want to Do” and “It Ain’t Me Babe”) and also exhibited his wild sense of humor (“Motorpsycho Nightmare”).

Getting bored with the folk scene, and impressed by The Byrds’ “folk/rock” reworking of “Mr. Tambourine Man,” as well as the Animals’ electric interpretation of the standard “House of the Rising Sun” (which he covered acoustically on his debut), Dylan in 1965 unleashed his brand of electric rock ‘n’ roll at the Newport Folk Festival. The stunned folk audience of normally passive-types cried blasphemy. The purists shouldn’t have been surprised that this was the direction Dylan was headed. The first side of his latest album released a few months earlier, *Bringing It All Back Home*, featured mostly electric rock ‘n’ roll, particularly the opening amphetamine-inspired cut, “Subterranean Homesick Blues.”

A month or two later, at Forest Hills, NY, the booping increased. But this time, Dylan wouldn’t hear it. He played the opening piano chords to “Ballad of A Thin Man,” and didn’t start singing for what seemed to be an eternity or at

ELLIOTT LANDY/STAR FILE



*Dylan in Woodstock, New York, circa 1967.*



least until the assholes in the crowd had shut up.

Although the folkies might have not liked Dylan's new music, the rest of the rock world (a much bigger population at that) recognized the brilliance in "Like A Rolling Stone" and entirely electric album *Highway 61 Revisited*. He completed the electric trilogy with the ground-breaking double album *Blonde On Blonde*. The album-opener, "Rainy Day Woman #12 & 35," hit number two and became his second million-selling single, despite being banned by numerous radio stations.

In 1966, Dylan toured England with a reckless abandon that produced probably his best on-stage music, as bootleg records and videotapes demonstrate.

**"THEN TAKE ME DISAPPEARIN' THROUGH THE SMOKE RINGS OF MY MIND..." from "Mr. Tambourine Man" (1964)**

*"An unholy alliance between Bob Dylan and marijuana was fucking with my head in a fierce way. Grass was showing me the same pure vision it freely dispensed to everyone at the time...."*

—Al Kooper, in his 1977 autobiography *Backstage Passes*. Kooper would later play prominent roles as organist on the ground-breaking Dylan single "Like A Rolling Stone" and albums *Highway 61 Revisited*, *Blonde On Blonde* and *New Morning*.

Dylan has said in interviews that he can't remember who turned him on to pot the first time. All he knows is that weed was plentiful in the Minneapolis bohemia coffeehouse scene that he frequented circa 1960. During this time, he met up with a St. Paul native, David Whitaker, who is not only alleged to have introduced him to various drugs but, more importantly, he introduced him to Woody Guthrie, poetry, books and also dragged him to his first political demonstration.

From Whitaker, Dylan learned of Blue and Pearly Gate morning glory seeds, which in 1960 could be purchased over the counter at local seed stores for 15 cents per packet. The seeds became a key ingredient in Dylan's favorite milk shakes.

According to Eric Von Schmidt, an early '60s contemporary of Dylan's in the Cambridge, MA folk scene, when he, Dylan and singing pal Richard Farina usually got together, "a lot of pot was smoked." Farina was the one who brought a bag of grass.

A few years later, Von Schmidt remembers being backstage with Dylan at a Joan Baez concert, smoking their brains out: "I was already in a zone. All of the sudden Joan

calls Dylan out to the stage, and he sings what seemed like a hundred verses of 'A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall.' I couldn't believe how this guy could remember all those verses. He may have missed a few; he may have made up a few. I was amazed by his ability to function. He had that covered."

Was Bob totally stoned? "It seemed to me he was. I know I was, and I hadn't smoked as much as him," says Von Schmidt.

At another gig in England around the same time, Von Schmidt was again amazed by Dylan's performance under the influence. "It was sort of a 'point me to the stage' sort of thing. There was just one little chair in the middle of stage."

The audience was hip to Dylan being out of it, wondering "would he hit the stool but hoping he wouldn't. But he did, he always did. He seemed like he was, as they say, 'one toke over the line,' but held it all together. It was one of the most impressive things I've ever seen in my life," laughs Von Schmidt, who says that as much as he likes to smoke pot and listen to music, he can't play it in that state. "I'm like, what's this in my hand? A guitar?"

In a 1963 *Playboy* interview with Nat Hentoff, Dylan explained what opium, hash and pot meant to him. "Now those things aren't drugs; they just bend your mind a little. I think everybody's mind should be bent once in a while." As for LSD, Dylan commented tongue-in-cheek: "LSD is for mad, hateful people who want revenge."

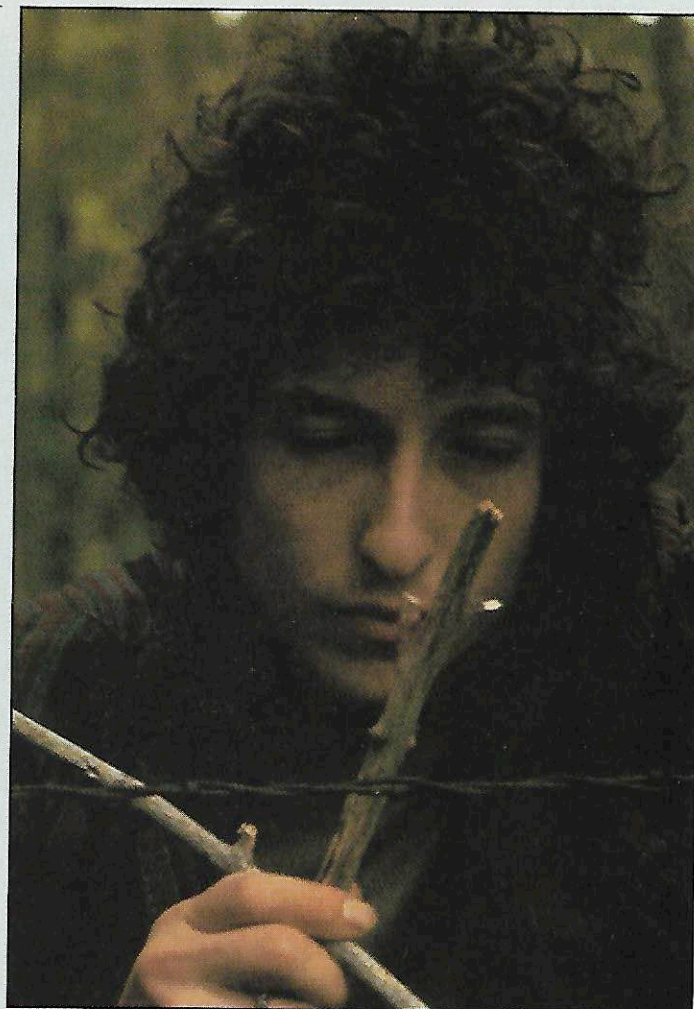
Filmmaker D.A. Pennebaker, who made a movie of Dylan's 1965 British tour called *Don't Look Back*, was a camera-

man for the documentary of the 1966 British tour captured on the never officially released *Eat The Document*, originally intended for ABC.

Pennebaker often held the stash for the Dylan troupe while they were performing or filming. "I can't handle drugs. Whenever I took a joint, I had to choke," he says in 1992 at his New York office. But back then he was amazed how the music became energized and underwent a change for the better when the wiry Dylan and company ingested illegal substances.

"The problem I had was that I realized 'if I'm not careful I'm going to make a pro-drug film'," which wasn't Pennebaker's intention and why no drug-taking is actually seen in the final cut of *Don't Look Back*. The filmmaker explains: "I feel drugs are very private. It's their business." Even though the obvious message behind the double-

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GLOBE PHOTOS



# DYLAN

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entendre "Rainy Day Woman #12 & 35" doesn't need to be deciphered, Dylan never wanted to come off as a pothead or spokesman for the HIGH TIMES generation.

A WBAI-FM listener who got through to Dylan while he was taking calls on the air in 1966, hoped to get a public pot endorsement from the horse's mouth. The caller asked Dylan to explain what he meant by "everyone must get stoned."

Seriously answering the question, in what didn't sound like a put-on for the first time in the two hours, Dylan said the lyrics have to do with "going against the tide, doing what you believe in, even if people take offense."

Dylan was always uncomfortable being a hippie guru, let alone a PR guy for the drug culture. So in one '60s interview, he did his best to disassociate from such characterizations: "I never have and never will write a 'drug song'."

Biographer Anthony Scaduto relays a telling anecdote about Dylan, on the mercurial spring 1966-tour, encountering in Perth a beautiful, 20-year-old Australian actress who asked him to turn her on to pot for the first time. Dylan declined, saying: "No, I'm not going to give you any. I'm not going to start you off anything."

In 1985, Dylan told Rolling Stone's Kurt Loder: "I never got hooked on any drug—not like you'd say, Eric Clapton: his drug period." He goes on to say that Jimi Hendrix's death was a "waste" and reminisced how he saw the guitarist once in the backseat of a limousine parked on Bleeker Street in Greenwich Village. "I couldn't tell whether he was dead or alive," Dylan lamented.

## "MAMA, CAN THIS REALLY BE THE END?" from "Stuck Inside of Mobile With the Memphis Blues Again" (1966)

At the peak of his creative powers, Dylan's life nearly crashed to a halt, after a motorcycle spill in the summer of 1966 near his home in upstate New York. After a long recovery period, Dylan began jamming with The Band (who'd backed him up on the 1966 tour) in the basement of their West Saugerties house near Woodstock. Largely improvisational, the home-demo songs were funny vignettes of interesting characters, but lacked polish. Dylan and The Band played a loose, spontaneous rock'n'roll that, to this day,

many diehards insist, was his artistic apex.

Although Dylan apparently deemed the tapes as rehearsals and not suitable for official release, the *Basement Tapes* and earlier outtakes were illicitly popping up in record shops as *The Great White Wonder* and were selling for about \$12. The first bootleg record was born.

What Columbia did put out after the motorcycle accident—*John Wesley Harding* in 1968—was pronounced to be a return to acoustic form, featuring protest songs like "Pity the Poor Immigrant," "Dear Landlord" and "All Along The

Watchtower." Dylan followed it in 1969 with a bonafide country record (*Nashville Skyline*) featuring a duet with Johnny Cash, who invited him to appear on his television show.

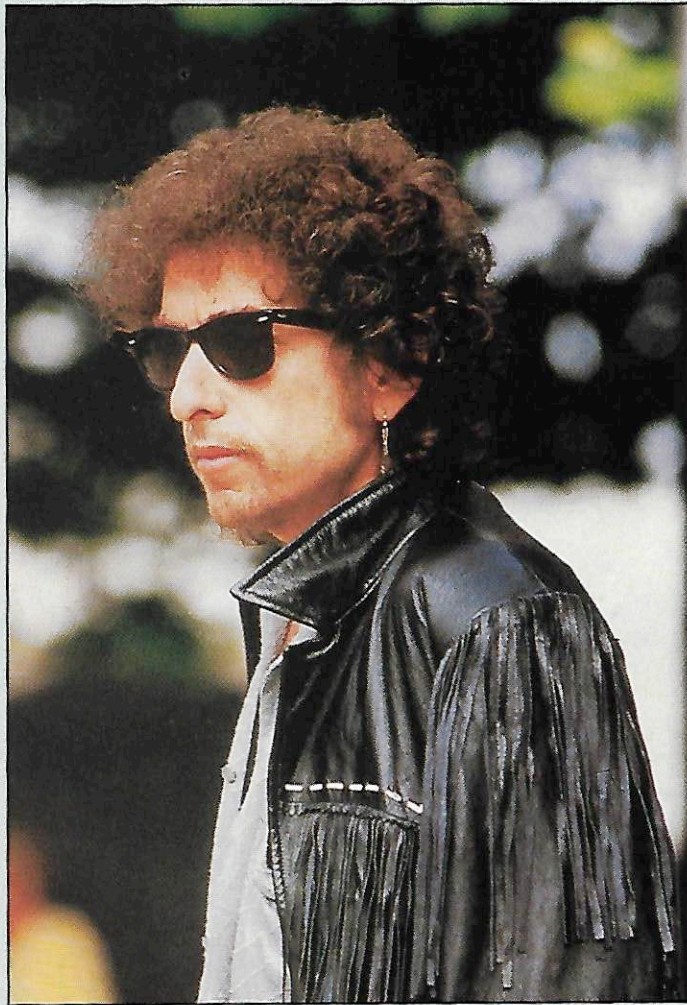
Following the Woodstock festival, where Dylan didn't perform although he lived not too far away, his rustic upstate bohemia became too much of a tourist trap, and he moved the family back to Greenwich Village. There he was awaited by "Dylanologist" A.J. Weberman, who would lead rallies in front of Dylan's townhouse, clamoring that he'd sold out and become a regular heroin user. Around this time Dylan caught Weberman going through his garbage (looking for syringes) and beat the shit out of him.

In an effort to concentrate on his family and also get everyone—the critics, the fans, the music business, his manager Albert Grossman—off his back, Dylan released a strange double album in 1970 called *Self Portrait*, which opened with a Lawrence Welk-like female chorus

hymning "All the tired horses...." Rolling Stone, in the first line of its review, aptly asked: "What is this shit?" Dylan quickly followed *Self Portrait* with the forementioned *New Morning*, which was a return to creative form. A mixture of folk, rock, blues, jazz and gospel, *New Morning* remains one of his most rewarding musical exercises.

Sick of New York, Dylan moved the family to Malibu, California. He stayed out of the limelight again for a few years, with the exceptions of appearing at George Harrison's Bangladesh benefit concert, and appearing in and writing the soundtrack for Sam Peckinpah's western *Pat Garrett & Billy the Kid*. By January 1974 Dylan was itching to get back to work, and huddled with The Band to record *Planet Waves* before embarking with them on a massive, triumphant US tour that had six-million ticket requests.

With his marriage falling apart, Dylan next recorded *Blood on the Tracks*, hailed by critics as a masterpiece that



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