

Good Night, Sweet Prince

by [Jeff Plude](#) (May 2020)



Endless Highway 1, Bob Dylan, 2015-16

Bob Dylan has morphed into and out of several roles as America's modern-day bard. He started out six decades ago as a sullen, sardonic singer-songwriter of folkie protest tunes, a sort of disaffected troubadour with a Beatnik vibe but without (for the most part) the decadence and self-indulgence. Four years ago he won a Nobel Prize in literature. Now, well into the last act of his life, he has taken on the part of *Hamlet's* Horatio to tell the story of the mother of all modern "conspiracy theories" in his latest song.

Though “Murder Most Foul” is not really a “song” in the popular sense of the word, in my view. It has no melody to speak of. It’s more like a dirge, or maybe a pop epic-tragedy in the modern American vernacular.

Anyhow, Mr. Dylan’s tale is about the assassinated “king” of America, President John F. Kennedy. He took his seat in the oval office about the same time Mr. Dylan was beginning to take center stage in the popular culture. President Kennedy liked to listen to the recording of the musical *Camelot*, which began its original run just before he was inaugurated and ended not quite a year before the curtain fell on his own life. It too featured a legendary king who was greatly wronged, though in a much different way.

The title “Murder Most Foul” comes from words spoken in the first scene of *Hamlet* by the ghost of the king to his son; it’s how he sums up the truth of his untimely death. But it is from the end of the play that Mr. Dylan seems to have taken his own cue. In the last scene, Hamlet is dying and Horatio tells his friend that he wants to join him in death. But the prince pleads with his foil and alter-ego to refrain from acting like an “antique Roman”:

Oh God, Horatio, what a wounded name

Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!

If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,

Absent thee from felicity a while,

And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,

To tell my story.

For at least this song, Mr. Dylan has become the scholar-observer instead of the “mad prince” with a penchant for puns that he has been known for throughout his career (though he plays a little of that too here). There is method to his madness.

What’s surprising in all this, at least to me, is not the fact that Mr. Dylan appears in the song to have donned the dreaded tinfoil hat, as his critics might mock (Phrygian cap, I think, is more accurate). It’s the Christian imagery that pervades “Murder Most Foul” from beginning to end. Shakespeare himself alludes to the Bible more than any other source, including Roman and Greek mythology, in his plays. *Hamlet* itself is a prime example.

Mr. Dylan went through a phase himself in the late seventies in which he claimed to have become an Evangelical Christian. He released three albums of contemporary gospel music and a song called “Gotta Serve Somebody,” which won a Grammy (and which John Lennon countered with, appropriately enough given what we know about him now, “Serve Yourself”). Mr. Dylan even told his audiences from the stage that “Jesus Christ is the answer.” But I’m not claiming now that Mr. Dylan is still a true believer in the orthodox sense. However, “Murder Most Foul” proves to me, at least, and I think to anyone else with ears to hear, that he sees the moral and social decline of the United States of America and the withering of its Christian roots as not only a fact, but one that’s inextricably bound up with the cold-blooded, savage, public assassination of America’s youngest-elected president, and the half-century coverup and the smear campaign of the president’s personal

life that followed in its wake.

After all, Mr. Dylan was born Robert Zimmerman, the son of a man whose first name was Abram, the original name of the patriarch of Israel. As the apostle Paul says, all Christians are spiritually descended from the seed of Abraham.

Mr. Dylan released “Murder Most Foul” on his YouTube channel. It was his first original composition in eight years and the longest of his oeuvre, clocking in at a colossal seventeen minutes and nearly 1,400 words. (*Hamlet*, coincidentally, is Shakespeare’s longest play.) Even here he appealed to what he called during a *60 Minutes* interview in 2004 the “chief commander—in this earth and in the world we can’t see”:

This is an unreleased song we recorded a while back that you might find interesting. Stay safe, stay observant and may God be with you.

The timing of the song’s debut was auspicious, as only an old veteran of his pop nobility could orchestrate. He unveiled it on March 26—a little more than a week after a mysterious pandemic shut the whole world down and from which it is still reeling. Suddenly the apocalypse predicted by the Bible, and the global dystopia that will signal it, did not seem so farfetched as many may believe. On May 24, almost two months to the day after he broke his nearly decade of creative silence, Mr. Dylan will turn seventy-nine. It seems to be a coda with a vengeance to a long, strange career. And now, for many, it has just gotten stranger, considering the subject matter.

(On April 17, he released yet another song, "I Contain Multitudes," this time taking his title from Whitman's "Song of Myself." But at four and a half minutes long, it has nothing of the breadth and import of "Murder Most Foul.")

As far as the music goes, Mr. Dylan's trademark singsong twang trumps the tinkling piano keys and droning violins that repeat over and over without going anywhere. There is no resolution, and certainly no hook. It's just an aimless nonmelodic line. It's Muzak for the masses.

His lyrics are perhaps as prosaic as Mr. Dylan has ever written. Arranged in five stanzas of rhyming couplets, all but one of the sections ending with the chorus of "murder most foul," the song tells a fairly straightforward but remarkably full narrative. It begins like a historical nursery rhyme:

It was a dark day in Dallas, November '63

A day that will live on in infamy

After mentioning that "President Kennedy was "a-ridin' high," Mr. Dylan is not five verses in when he abruptly shifts gears:

Being led to the slaughter like a sacrificial lamb

He said, "Wait a minute, boys, you know who I am?"

"Of course we do, we know who you are!"

Then they blew off his head while he was still in the car

This is the first Christian reference, and also the first reference to “conspiracy theory” (a term that is said to have been concocted by the CIA after the assassination to deal with doubters of the official version). As I said, the two in Mr. Dylan’s mind seem to be bound together, though I think he clearly sees the “theory” as fact. A majority of Americans concur, according to various surveys; even Robert Kennedy, though publicly sanctioning the conclusions of the Warren Commission’s report, was said privately to not believe that his brother was murdered by Lee Harvey Oswald alone.

Not until the start of the second stanza does pop-music enter the stage. It’s not very consoling in the end:

Hush, little children, you’ll understand

The Beatles are comin’, they’re gonna hold your hand

Slide down the banister, go get your coat

Ferry ’cross the Mersey and go for the throat

The “little children” are not given the facts, let alone justice; they are spoon-fed distraction, in the form of four lads with long hair, pretty voices, snappy tunes, funny accents, and smug quips. Mr. Dylan can’t resist a jabbing pun on the name of the river running through the Fab Four’s hometown and “mercy,” one of those old-fashioned Christian attributes epitomized in the beatitude: “Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.” Not quite three months

after Mr. Kennedy was brutally slain, the kings of rock landed at John F. Kennedy Airport in front of a large, manic crowd to kick off the British pop-music invasion.

From here on conspiracy and pop music come in a montage. The effect is kind of like the brief “Newsreel” sections spliced between chapters of the *USA* trilogy (I think John Dos Passos is a greatly underappreciated American novelist). Three bums in rags . . . Woodstock . . . the Aquarian Age . . . Altamont . . . the Grassy Knoll (an eerie site, if you’ve ever stood there) . . . even a “wise old owl” (an occult symbol, according to some sources).

Finally, Dealey Plaza becomes “The place where faith, hope, and charity died”—the famous three pillars of Christianity listed by the apostle Paul in his letter to the wayward Corinthians. Then Mr. Dylan goes to the heart of the matter:

What is the truth, and where did it go?

Ask Oswald and Ruby, they oughta know

It’s half of the same question that Pilate asked Jesus at his show trial, one that rings out across the millennia. In that case the truth, as Jesus earlier referred to himself, was standing right in front of Pilate. Mr. Dylan seems to be saying something similar here.

The climax of the piece comes in the third and longest stanza: the introduction of the Zapruder film, the crown jewel of

amateur investigators of the Kennedy assassination. It is certainly one of the most tragic and well-known half minute of documentary video in American history. I think it clearly shows—for those with eyes to see—that President Kennedy was shot from two different directions, i.e., by two gunmen, which by definition would be a conspiracy. (Mr. Dylan sings: “Seen thirty-three times, maybe more”—throwing a bone to conspiracy buffs and occultists alike, since that number is revered by Free Masons, whose highest degree is the thirty-third). Most important of all, it also shows the president’s face being blown off, literally, by the last of several shots, a swirl of skin and blotch of red exploding from his head in the final frames:

It’s vile and deceitful, it’s cruel and it’s mean

Ugliest thing that you ever have seen

They killed him once and they killed him twice

Killed him like a human sacrifice

The day that they killed him, someone said to me, “Son

The age of the Antichrist has just only begun”

The Antichrist? Mr. Dylan is far from being a resurrected Milton, as one critic has apparently ludicrously compared him to. But if there’s any doubt in Mr. Dylan’s mind about the assassination of President Kennedy triggering the death of the national soul, this is as blatant a rebuke to that as he could give. Even Hamlet, let alone Horatio, would not be so “mad” as to pull such a prank. The fact that the speaker addresses him as “Son,” which recalls both Jesus and more faintly Hamlet, the words unmistakably come from an old-time Christian, perhaps the kind that listened to the Grand Ole Opry on

Saturday nights and dressed in his Sunday best the next day,
the Lord's Day, to sing, to worship, to listen, and to pray.

Then, in case the Beast rearing its satanic head slipped by anybody, the short fourth stanza begins by underscoring the devastating, long-lasting effects of this traumatic public "sacrifice." The first line ironically uses the title of Woody Allen's first film, in 1965, a raunchy "romcom" that sets the stage for the sex-obsessed cinema of the future:

What's new, pussycat? What'd I say?

I said the soul of a nation been torn away

Mr. Dylan caps this stanza, the only one that doesn't end with "murder most foul," with lewd, sophomoric pun—one that chucks Christianity and its supposed outdated sexual code into the American dirt along with its young, virulent president. Who, as we now know, thanks to his many detractors after his summary execution, was no choirboy.

Guitar Slim going down slow

Play it for me and for Marilyn Monroe

The finale, the last and longest stanza, taking up a third of the song, is really more of a prolonged fadeout, a litany of Americana. It's nostalgic, wistful. Most of the lines start "Play ..., play ...," but sometimes he makes requests for others: "Play it for the reverend, play it for the pastor." It's as if Mr. Dylan is on his deathbed, or maybe gazing out from his

rocker on the front porch, dozing in and out of a sort of stream-of-conscious outpouring of all the songs and movies and characters that still thrive in his imagination, from Jelly Roll Morton and Wolfman Jack to the Eagles and Stevie Nicks. But even here he's careful to include "The Old Rugged Cross," "In God We Trust," "One Night of Sin," and "That Old Devil Moon."

In the middle of this collection of pop-culture memorabilia, Mr. Dylan flares up one last time. He refers to the president's brothers, one of whom would suffer a similar ignominious end five short years later, when he was on the brink of reclaiming his brother's old office. Supposedly by yet another young, lone gunman.

Then the saga is over, out of moral gas:

Play the Blood Stained Banner—play Murder Most Foul

A reference to the Confederate flag, no less. A century after its founding, America was almost torn asunder by a civil war that slaughtered a generation of young Americans; it was punctuated by the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. A century after that, another assassination of a popular president began a different kind of civil war—a spiritual one, in which generations of American souls would be lost, Mr. Dylan seems to lament.

I was too young to personally remember President Kennedy's death. But when his brother was killed I was a young boy and I walked into my neighbor's house one morning to pick up my

friend for our walk to school, and his older sisters, in their late teens, were in the living room watching TV and sobbing. On the black-and-white screen I seem to remember seeing a man in a suit face up on the floor, a pool of blood under his head. I later learned it was Bobby Kennedy. But back then I wondered what it was all about, and just went to school and forgot about it.

My mother, on the other hand, apparently could not forget about President Kennedy. After she entered a nursing home my wife and I went in my parents' house to clean it out. Among the hoards of stuff, we found a *Life* cover with President Kennedy's picture on it, and a *Daily News* whose front page showed Mr. Johnson being sworn in aboard Air Force One next to Jackie Kennedy (President Lincoln's portrait was on the back page). There was also a commemorative hardcover book, which was thin but whose cover and pages were a little larger than a piece of letter-sized paper, called *The torch is passed . . .*, with photos and text of Jack and Jackie in the White House.

We also came across some black-and-white photos of my mother in her younger days wearing a Chanel suit and pillbox hat that Mrs. Kennedy had made fashionable—and which on the plane that day of her husband's death she refused to change out of, even though it was spattered with his brains and blood. Jackie Kennedy and my mother were a year apart in age, and both had the same dark mid-length hair and the face of a pretty French-American girl. Though my mother was as far down the social rung by birth from the first lady as a young woman could be.

Most telling of all, perhaps, was a slip of paper that my mother had written when she was seeing a psychologist in her seventies and we were estranged. On it were written a couple

of what I take to be traumatic events in her life shortly after my birth. One of them was her twentysomething brother's tragic death in a car accident. Another was the assassination of President Kennedy.

As Hamlet dies, Horatio promises to endure and carry out his last request. But he overflows with love for his royal friend:

Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet Prince,
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!

President Kennedy was far from an angel. But he was perhaps the last and best hope this country had, Mr. Dylan seems to be telling the world of the early twenty-first century. Something was ripped out of America that day, he seems to believe: a nation that was once under God, was founded on Christian principles, and stood for truth and justice. An ideal worth fighting for.

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