

Mr. Tambourine Man, Play A(nother) Song for Me

by Phyllis Chelser



The great gravelly-voiced Bob Dylan, one of our nation's premier troubadours and poet-singers, just released a new spoken song, accompanied by a piano and a piercing violin and it is one hell of a powerful and mournful elegy for America, beginning with the assassination of President Kennedy, a "murder most foul." There would be other assassinations in that decade and all the while the bands played on producing the most extraordinary and memorable American music. Dylan brings the past to life by calling out the music which accompanied the stories of our lives wherever we were in the 1960s and 1970s.

The Beatles, Wolfman Jack, "St. James Infirmary," Etta James,

"I'd Rather Go Blind," Nat King Cole, Patsy Cline, John Lee Hooker, Stan Getz, Theolonius Monk, Charlie Parker, Stevie Nicks, Jelly Roll Morton and "Lucille." He names other songs and singers too, "What's New Pussycat," "Wake up Little Susie," "The Old Rugged Cross," "All That Jazz," "Nature Boy," "The Rising Sun," "Stella by Starlight," "Misty," "That Old Devil Moon," "Anything Goes"—even Moonlight Sonata in F#." He names so many songs, singers, bands, films, and concerts which together re-member his and our America at that time: Woodstock, Altamont, the age of Aquarius, the Beatles, Marilyn Monroe, "Gone with the Wind," Gospel, Jazz, folk, Hollywood, Country, and Rock n' Roll.

No doubt, one can interpret why he chose each song, each singer, in deep and resonant ways. I've no time to do that just now. Without doing that, Dylan's spoken art, all rhymed poetry, still creates a haunting lament for the "slow decay" of our country, which, in his view, has "lost its soul" and which he pegs to Kennedy's assassination.

It is a moving piece, perhaps a great piece, and yet: I remember other music, female music, from that time too, music that is not part of Dylan's tapestry and I wonder why not. He does call out to Etta James, Patsy Cline, and Stevie Nicks but Dylan makes no mention of Joan Baez, Judy ("Blue Eyes") Collins, Aretha, Ella, Nina Simone, Laura Nyro, Joni Mitchell, Dusty Springfield, Barbara Streisand, Janis, Big Momma Cass, Tina Turner—all of whom had the most profound effect on my generation of American women.

On the other hand: Even Stevie the Wondrous is absent, as are Johnny Cash, The Rolling Stones, Willie Nelson, The Doors, Marvin Gaye, Ray Charles, and Jimi Hendrix to name only a few. Can't fit 'em all in, the musical richness of that time constitutes too huge a legacy to fit into one brilliant song.

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