

# THE SONG WAS THERE BEFORE ME: The Influence of Traditional Music on the Songs of Bob Dylan

by Elizabeth Butler Scalet



Anyone who has had even brief contact with the world of folksong knows that one of the important aspects of folksong is oral transmission—the handing on of songs from one generation to the next or from one locale to another without formal written text. The British who sang “Barbara Allen” sang the same song in their new home in North America, but sooner or later subtle changes began to creep in. “In Scarlet town where I did dwell” eventually became “In New York town where I did dwell” or in whatever town the singer happened to dwell. Other less obvious changes occurred, all designed to make the song more responsive to the changing situation of the singer and his audience. It is this ongoing, living aspect of folk song that is often called the folk process.

During the folk boom or revival of the late 1950’s and early 1960’s a new element became apparent in the oral transmission process. Singers were learning songs not only from the people in their own community, but also from phonograph records and radio. As a result, a singer could be exposed to many different styles of folksong; after being exposed, it was often easy to imitate what he had heard.<sup>1</sup> He could, and many of the folk revival singers did, sing an unaccompanied song in the high whining inflections of the Southern Appalachians and turn right around and sing a sea chantey or a Negro blues tune. Many of these city singers were primarily performers, adept at imitating and absorbing a variety of folksong styles. Others, like the Kingston Trio, were even more commercially oriented, skilled at adapting a variety of styles to their own more salable, smooth sound. A few were talented writers. All were encouraged by the confusing copyright laws to take liberties with whatever version of a traditional song they chose to record. A singer could legally claim author’s royalties on a traditional song as long as his version was significantly different from other

1. Oscar Brand, *The Ballad Mongers: The Rise of the Modern Folksong* (New York, 1962), p. 147.

versions of the song already registered. On the other hand, if the singer simply gave credit where credit was due and called the song “traditional” the money usually went to the record company. Similar royalty practices occurred in the sheet music publishing industry.<sup>2</sup> What singer wouldn’t be tempted to change a couple of words, alter the melody a bit, and double his profits, all quite legally? Thus the profit motive encouraged singers to claim authorship for many songs which they obviously didn’t write. Peter, Paul, and Mary, for example, are credited on one of their albums for the authorship of such perennials as “All My Trials” and “Polly Von.”<sup>3</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum the folk purists were adamantly performing their traditional songs in a showcase fashion, perpetuating unchanging, often archaic versions of songs which seldom reflected the modern situation. Folk song became art song, and Joan Baez became its most successful proponent.



But between these two camps stood a young man who refused to change songs capriciously but who likewise refused to resist the normal changes which songs undergo, a singer who became the dominant artist of the 1960’s by *interacting* with the tradition rather than by trying to capitalize on it on the one hand or fossilize it on the other. Much like his idol Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan took traditional music for the tool that it is, and with no scholarly reticence whatsoever, used it to communicate his own thoughts and feelings. In doing so, he became more truly a part of the tradition than many of his seemingly more folk-conscious compatriots. Dylan seemed from the first to understand this better than anyone around him; as he said of Joan Baez during the first flush of his protest writing (before Baez began recording contemporary material), “. . . she’s still singing about Mary Hamilton. I mean, where’s that at?”<sup>4</sup> Baez apparently got the message. Soon she began to introduce Dylan’s songs, and sometimes Dylan himself, into her well-attended concerts.

People began thinking of Dylan as a *writer* of folk songs, as contradictory as that seems to be. Later, when he abandoned at least some aspects of his early music and began writing “rock” songs, this early reputation for creativity would contribute to the development of the attitude that Dylan is a completely unique genius whose music is totally original. There is certainly some truth to the contention that

2. Brand, pp. 201-215.

3. Peter, Paul, and Mary, *In the Wind* (Warner Brothers Records, 1963)

4. Anthony Scaduto, *Bob Dylan* (New York, 1972), p. 145.

Dylan is brilliant, but he is hardly the sole creator of many of his best songs. Many were co-authored with generations of singers and unknown hands. For Dylan's music reflects always, whether directly or indirectly, the musical styles he has been exposed to, from his early interest in Little-Richard-style rock and roll to later fascinations with Woody Guthrie, country music, and the blues. More than any other well-known musician of the last two decades Dylan uses—often quite consciously—the music he knows best as the foundation for new musical creations which express the changing needs of the times. It is this molding of old material to fit a new environment which I would like to illustrate with several examples, for it is in this that Dylan is most plainly a one-man paradigm of how the folk process works.

On Dylan's highly influential second album *Freewheelin'* a song titled "Bob Dylan's Dream" is described in the liner notes as having the same melody as an old British song, "Lord Franklin," which Dylan had heard in England and had re-written with new lyrics.<sup>5</sup> As was mentioned earlier, this was a common practice. But Dylan's new song was not simply a set of original lyrics superimposed upon a traditional melody; it was, instead, a sensitive reinterpretation of the original. Both the original and Dylan's song dealt with loyalty and friendship, interrupted by the passage of time. In "Lord Franklin" the singer is awaiting the unlikely return of Lord Franklin from an expedition to seek the northwest passage. Dylan's song deals also with the subject of friendship, in particular the early friends he had who have gone separate ways to seek the passage into adulthood. The tension of loss is apparent in both songs. More specifically, Dylan has borrowed—in addition to the melody—specific phrases from the original lyrics. Compare, for example, the first verse of "Lord Franklin" and the first verse of "Bob Dylan's Dream":

It was homeward bound one night on the deep  
Swinging in my hammock I fell asleep  
I dreamed a dream and I thought it true  
Concerning Franklin and his gallant crew.  
—“Lord Franklin”<sup>6</sup>

While riding on a train going west  
I fell asleep for to take my rest  
I dreamed a dream and it made me sad  
Concerning myself and the first few  
Friends I had

—“Bob Dylan's Dream”<sup>7</sup>

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5. In all likelihood Dylan heard this song at closer range from his good friend Paul Clayton who recorded it under the title "Lady Franklin's Lament." Dylan's own title reflects this.

6. The Pentangle, "Lord Franklin," *Cruel Sister* (Reprise, 1972).

7. Bob Dylan, "Bob Dylan's Dream," *Freewheelin'* (Columbia, 1963)

Most of the changes Dylan has made tend to be aimed at subtly reflecting his own situation. These are changes not so much from the general to the specific as from the old to the new; rather than making the song more personal to Dylan alone, they make it more reflective of the modern American situation as a whole. The obvious change is that instead of a ship, which is basically foreign to the modern experience, the early focus in Dylan's song is shifted to a train. In addition, specific geographic names (such as Baffin's Bay, which appears in the original but disappears in Dylan's song) and British references have been changed, and archaic phrasings have been altered. Note particularly in the original the last two lines, "Ten thousand pounds would I freely give/To say on earth that my Lord Franklin do live"<sup>8</sup> which become, in the last two lines of Dylan's song, "Ten thousand dollars at the drop of a hat/I'd give it all gladly if our lives could be like that."<sup>9</sup> Those are clearly not changes calculated to claim authorship and therefore royalties; they are functional changes designed to reinterpret the old material, to give us a new song that tells an old story in our own terms.

This is true also of "With God on Our Side," the melody of which Dylan took note for note from "The Patriot Game," a song written by Dominic Behan in the 1950's about the Irish situation. Behan had, in turn, borrowed his melody in part from the old song of love between a soldier and a local girl, "One Morning in May." Once again, Dylan has borrowed more than just the melody; he has borrowed an entire mode. The second verse of Behan's song is as follows:

My name is O'Hanlon, I'm just gone sixteen  
My home is in Monaghan, there I was weaned  
I was taught all my life cruel England to blame  
And so I'm a part of the patriot game.<sup>10</sup>

The song continues in succeeding verses to describe heroes of the Irish rebellion that he has learned about in school. Dylan follows this pattern quite explicitly. Leaving out entirely Behan's first verse (a kind of traditional come-all-ye introduction), Dylan's song begins with his model of Behan's second verse:

My name it means nothing, my age it means less  
The country I come from is called the Midwest  
I's taught and brought up there the laws to abide  
And that the land that I live in has God on its side.<sup>11</sup>

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8. Pentangle, *Cruel Sister*.

9. Bob Dylan, *Freewheelin'*.

10. Dominic Behan, "The Patriot Game," *Reprints from Sing Out*, Vol. 3, ed. Irwin Silber (New York, 1961), p. 37.

11. Bob Dylan, "With God on Our Side," *The Times They Are a-Changin'* (Columbia, 1964).

The song then gives us Dylan's description of what he learned in school about *American* heroes. Indeed, he has simply made the song American rather than Irish. Because the American situation (during the bomb shelter/nuclear panic years) differed from the Irish one, the singer is unidentified; all of us were equally eligible for anonymous annihilation. The Irish, of course, were actually involved in intermittent personal combat at the time Behan composed "The Patriot Game"; thus the song's specificity is justified.<sup>12</sup> Significantly, Dylan's song provides a cynical, peculiarly American solution: "If God's on our side, He'll stop the next war."<sup>13</sup>

This same method appears again in "The Ballad of Hollis Brown," a song which Dylan said was inspired by a newspaper account of a farmer whose continued poverty finally led him to shoot his five children, his wife, and himself. Dylan's melody is, once again, borrowed from a song that already reflects the point he wants to make. This time he has borrowed from the old Appalachian tune "Poor Man." Dylan alters the song's rhythmic structure somewhat, but the songs are still unquestionably close musical relatives. Both use the repeated line pattern, although Dylan's longer lines are repeated only once. Both songs have the same theme: oppressive poverty which places the father of a large family in an untenable position. The primary difference between the two is that while "Poor Man" is basically a generalized statement about a *condition*, Dylan's song is a very specific description of a particular *situation*. This is illustrated most clearly by these parallel verses:

You got no shells for your gun, poor man  
You got no shells for your gun, poor man  
Got no shells for your gun  
Hound's so hungry he can't run, poor man  
—"Poor Man"<sup>14</sup>

Your grass is turning black, there's no water in your well  
Your grass is turning black, there's no water in your well  
You spent your last lone dollar on seven shotgun shells.  
—"The Ballad of Hollis Brown"<sup>15</sup>

In the first example, the shotgun shells are a class of things, the lack of which contributes to the poor man's sad condition. In Dylan's

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12. Behan, p.37.

13. Bob Dylan, "With God on Our Side," *The Times They Are a-Changin'*.

14. Tom Rush, *Tom Rush* (Elektra, 1963).

15. Dylan, "The Ballad of Hollis Brown," *The Times They Are a-Changin'*.

song, however, they are seven very specific shotgun shells—one for each person in the family.

But Dylan's changes are of another kind as well. Just as Woody Guthrie often used traditional melodies with completely new words—often using the same melody several times—so Dylan sometimes becomes attracted to a melody and sets totally new words to it. For example, Dylan completely discarded the original lyrics to the old children's song "Nottamun Town" to use the melody for his own protest song, "Masters of War."



Both of the approaches to traditional music which I have described—the reworking of old lyrics and the occasional complete replacement of old lyrics can be seen in many more songs than I have time to mention here, and they may be found in his post-rock work as well as his early writing. Two songs on Dylan's post-rock album *John Wesley Harding*<sup>16</sup> illustrate this: "I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine" borrows the melody and clearly plays upon the words of the old labor standby "I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill," while "I Pity the Poor Immigrant" uses the melody and nothing else from an obscure Scots song about travelling drummers, "Tramps and Hawkers." Once again, in these songs it can be seen that Dylan's changes are to a purpose; as in his early work, his changes bring the songs closer to our own experience, just as all who are participants in the folk process (rather than watchers and preservers) must alter the material they have in order to reflect the world in which they live. Dylan himself said it best when he was asked how he wrote songs. He said, "I just figure that I made it up or got it someplace—the song was there before me, before I came along. I just sort of comed down and took it down with a pencil but it was all there before I came around. That's the way I feel about it."<sup>17</sup>

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16. Bob Dylan, *John Wesley Harding* (Columbia, 1968).

17. Scaduto, p. 120.

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