From Musical Revolution to Countercultural Music: The Poet and the King

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The wind, the wind is blowing,
Through the graves the wind is blowing
Freedom soon will come.
Then we'll come from the shadow.
Leonard Cohen, *The Partisan* (1969)

The advent of rock and roll in 1955[1] and the ascent of the controversial figure of Elvis Presley signalled forthcoming social and cultural conflicts, as a growing fringe of America's post-war youth began questioning the established order. As the 1950s melted into the 1960s, the struggle for social change grew stronger, and the emergence of singer-songwriters such as Bob Dylan, whose lyrics and music captured the *zeitgeist*, came to impact the counterculture movement. Presley and Dylan's music are a perfect illustration of the way in which music helped alter society shedding direct light on the importance of popular culture as an element of political and societal change.

The present paper will examine how rock and roll and Elvis Presley in particular, "addressed issues greater than music" (Bertrand 122) as young white southerners began casting doubt upon the Deep South's legacy. I will then move on to discuss the role played by Bob Dylan, considered by many as "the Voice of a Generation," in the turbulent social climate of the sixties and early seventies. The harshness and anger in some of Dylan's lyrics encapsulate the major issues of the time, illustrating what Theodore Roszack observed: "Music inspired and carried the best insights of the counterculture" (Roszack, xxxiv). Finally, I will draw a comparison between Presley and Dylan who, although radically different artists are dominant figures in American popular culture and who, as individuals, mirror the complexity and ambivalence of American society. The significance of the musical links between Elvis Presley and Bob Dylan is often underestimated. The influence Presley, amongst others, exerted on Dylan illustrates not only the subversive nature of music, which posed a threat to the Establishment, but shows how popular music–blues and folk music–remained in touch with the country's social realities.

[1] Although the question of the origins of rock and roll is a fiercely disputed matter among music historians because of its complex evolution, 1954 is deemed a major milestone in the genre's history with Bill Haley's hit "Rock Around the Clock" in April 1954, which would later be the feature song in Richard Brooks's film *Blackboard Jungle* (1955). But it is probably Elvis Presley's first hit "That's All Right, Mama" recorded on July, 5, 1954 that may well be viewed as the nascence of rock and roll as it "emerged as a major force on the commercial popular culture scene," Richard Peterson, endnote 2, 114.

Musical Revolution: The Advent of Elvis Presley[2]

After the Second World War the South underwent a vast array of changes. The economic transformation and the rapid urbanization, characterized by the rural-to-urban transition of poor blacks and whites seeking employment and a better way of life, led to their acclimatization to urban conditions. The emergence of mixed neighbourhoods in the South contributed to the alleviation of racial tensions in a land of legal segregation. Moreover, as the social historian Michael T. Bertrand argues, the post-war southern youths appeared to be far less prejudiced than their parents as they overlooked the ingrained assumptions on the inferiority of black people. I will explore, in this paper, the way in which rock and roll and Elvis Presley, in particular, "mirrored and ultimately helped create an environment conducive to racial respect and tolerance" (Bertrand 11).

During the 1940s and the 1950s, the emergence of black radio stations contributed to create "a favourable cultural environment" (Bertrand 173)[3] for greater tolerance whilst paving the way for the advent of rock and roll. The growing number of musical events involving integrated audiences began threatening the South's static and hierarchical society, while segregationists came to view youths as a threat to the established order. Bertrand notes that the transplanted white youths searched for stability and status by embracing black music. In his much acclaimed biography on Elvis Presley, Peter Guralnick vividly depicts the attraction exerted on white youths, at the time, by the African-American musical culture which imbued North Green Street in Tupelo, Mississippi: "You only had to walk up the street and the street was *rocking*. Well-to-do white college boys and their dates would come out for the show on Saturday night―there was really nothing like it, you had to hand it to the colored people, they really knew how to live" (Guralnick, *Last Train* 28).

If major recording firms (R.C.A., Columbia, Capitol and American Decca) controlled the national and international means of production and promotion of popular music, smaller recording firms organized their entire operations on a regional level, while small independent recording companies like Sam Phillips' Sun Records "relied heavily if not exclusively on sub groups and minority cultures for audiences" (Bertrand 60). Sam Phillips had begun recording black performers such as Rufus Thomas and the black vocal group the Prisonaires, who had no place to go (63). Thanks to the likes of Phillips, the Chess brothers and others, a number of black artists, who would probably have had no chance of airplay, had, at last, the opportunity of gaining national fame and recognition as they "suddenly [began] walking America's airwaves" (Marcus, *Mystery Train* 157). These independent record companies played an essential role in the evolution of rock and roll (Bertrand 64). By the mid-1950s rhythm and blues had attracted listeners outside the African-American community, as record retailers and disc jockeys had noticed that a growing number of white teenagers requested rhythm and blues music. The growing popularity of the music encountered strong resistance from both the authorities and major record companies. As Bertrand contends, rhythm and blues music "posed a serious threat to those who administered custody of the country's musical standards" (67) as a result, the musical and moral custodians claimed that the lyrics of rhythm and blues songs "explored filth"

[2] My present paper is greatly indebted to Michael T. Bertrand's compelling and insightful study on the influence of rock and roll and Elvis Presley on Southern society. The terminological fluctuation between rhythm and blues rock and roll is due to the lack, at the time, of a clear definition. As Marcus posits, "they went through a lot of trouble finding a name for this music" (Marcus, *Mystery Train* 147).

[3] Albert Goldman notes that the "South's first black-oriented radio station went on the air at Memphis" (Goldman 131) in October 1948, a month after the Presley's had arrived in the city.

(67). This shift in musical taste signalled a significant change in Southern mentalities as it shed light on the permeation which was taking place along cultural lines, transforming racial attitudes and altering racial intolerance.

If the authorities reacted by confiscating juke boxes, the music industry tried to curtail the outside influence not only for ideological reasons but also for financial ones. The major recording firms suddenly came to realize that consumers were not inert and they were no longer the sole providers of popular music, despite their attempts, during the 1940s and 1950s, to disseminate minority music in mainstream to keep control of the industry. Consequently, rhythm and blues "posed a serious economic and cultural challenge to the musical and social establishment" (Bertrand 61). If rhythm and blues offended the urbane tastes of the middle-class African-American community, Hank Williams's music was also received negatively by the white-middle class, as Bertrand observes, "the realism of rhythm and blues and country music contradicted the expectations of prosperity, contentment, and harmony that the mainstream fostered" (63) thus defying the social conformism which prevailed at the time. But the Establishment and major record companies were certainly not prepared for what was about to happen when an "unlikely trio" (Guralnick and Jorgensen 18)―Elvis Presley, a 19-year old Memphian, Scotty Moore and Bill Black―walked into the Sun Studios, in Memphis on the afternoon of July 5, 1954. No one could have anticipated the musical earthquake which was about to revolutionize popular music forever, when rhythm and blues and country music melded, as Elvis's voice burst out singing "Big" Arthur Crudup's song "That's All Right, Mama" during the break of what had been an "unsuccessful" rehearsal session. "[T]he way the boy performed it, it came across with freshness and an exuberance, it came across with the kind of clear-eyed, unabashed *originality* that Sam [Phillips] sought in all the music that he recorded – it was "different," it was itself" (Guralnick, *Last Train* 95).[4]

Three days later, Sam Phillips brought the two one-sided acetates of "That's All Right, Mama" to the WHBQ DJ, Dewey Phillips. And, as soon as Dewey played the acetate, the switchboard lit up, and remained so as he played the song over and over again (Guralnick and Jorgensen 18-19). Elvis had triggered a musical revolution which was about to change the American social and musical landscape. The mainstream was clearly unprepared for what the press termed that "mongrel," or "nigger music" (Bertrand 104-105), which seemed to unleash the worst instincts among its young followers. After playing in Orlando, a local reporter Jean Yothers depicted the effect of Elvis and the new music on the audience in the *Orlando Sentinel* of May 16, 1955: "What hillbilly music does to the hillbilly music fans is absolutely phenomenal. It transports him into a wild, emotional and audible state of ecstasy" (Guralnick, *Last Train* 188).

If the young reporter seemed in "somewhat of a daze" (Guralnick 188), the moral custodians and the press[5] were in no way sharing her enthusiasm. When, a year later, Elvis performed on The Milton Berle Show on June 5, 1956 he gave a sexually aggressive performance of "Hound Dog" with "all the bumps and grinds of a stripper" (Guralnick and Jorgensen 73).[6] The press reacted by launching a scathing attack on his performance describing it as primitive and

[4] Three records provide an accurate impression on what Presley's early career sounded like: *Sunrise Elvis Presley, The Complete Million Dollar Quartet*, and the recent box set entitled *Young Man with the Big Beat*. See Marcus for an accurate description of Presley's voice at the time: "His voice is raw, pleading and pushing, full of indescribably sexy asides, [and] throaty nuances" (Marcus, *Mystery Train* 164).

[5] The press would belittle or ridicule him by referring to him as "a no talent performer," "the Vaudeville Valentino," or "the biggest freak in modern show business."

[6] See the footages of this performance in Malcolm Leo and Andrew Solt's film *This is Elvis* (1981).

obscene. The following month, July 10, 1956, after performing his first afternoon show in Florida, Judge Marion Gooding warned him, between the two shows, to "tone down his act" (73) or he would have to answer to the court. On September 12, 1956, the Police Chief of San Diego, California, threatened to jail Elvis for disturbing conduct were he ever to set foot back in the city (84). However, the cultural custodians of the Establishment, despite their overblown portrayal of rock and roll as a "case of musical delinquency" (Bertrand 150) were unable to silence it and, as Bertrand remarks, "[a]t the center of the rock'n'roll debate stood Elvis Presley." Presley's sudden success induced a ferocious backlash from the Establishment and the press. Most of their attacks carried both class and racial overtones. The Presleys economic indigence and their low social status had forced them to leave Tupelo, Mississippi,[7] for Memphis, Tennessee, in 1948. Despite the segregation laws in Memphis, blacks and whites came together on a daily basis while the poor blacks and whites were "similarly estranged from society at large" (Bertrand 196) and were viewed as outcasts who lived on the margins of society. While in Tupelo Elvis had been living on the fringe of the black ghetto:

> Living across Main Street from the jumble of crooked alleyways and tumbledown shacks that make up Shake Rag, he would have to have sensed something of the life, he could not have missed the tumultuous bursts of song, the colorful street vendors'cries, he would have observed it all with intense curiosity, and he might have envied the sharp flashes of emotion, the bright splashes of color, the feelings so boldly on display (Guralnick, *Last Train* 27).

In Memphis, the young Elvis attended rhythm and blues concerts and walked along Beale Street wearing garishly coloured zoot suits, his hair greased into a ducktail.[8] By embracing black musical culture Elvis disrupted the southern social mores. According to Bertrand's Gramscian interpretation of the historical context, rhythm and blues and rock and roll "became a shared vehicle of expression for various groups the mainstream had ignored, maligned, or rejected" (Bertrand 195)[9] thus endangering the staid world of the 1950s. Elvis's success rested on his performance of a musical style "associated with working-class and black culture" (195). As a consequence, rock and roll music began breaking down social and racial barriers as Elvis's success opened the door for the working-class southerners who sought prosperity[10] but also for the Black artists who had been confined within the boundaries of their community.[11]

By embracing black music, Elvis had not only crossed the forbidden line of legal segregation, he also questioned the whole complexity of the South's social structure as well as its historical roots. But Presley also had to face the grudge coming from a fringe of the African-American population. Some members of the African-American community felt, once more,

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[7] See Peter Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis:* "In Tupelo [the Presleys] were scorned, like virtually anyone from above the highway, as poor white trash" (23-24).

[8] See *Elvis What Happened?* "He had long brown hair cut in a ducktail fashion. The handfuls of Vaseline he put on it made it look much darker than it was" (Red West, Sonny West, Dave Hebler as told to Steve Dunleavy 15). In his controversial biography on Elvis, Albert Goldman notes that "Elvis […] acquired the classic punk look" (Goldman 114).

[9] See also Marcus: "for Elvis, the blues was a style of freedom" (Marcus, *Mystery Train* 171).

[10] Such was the case for artists like Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee Lewis.

[11] Little Richard acknowledged Elvis's influence on the dissemination of black music: "He was an integrator, Elvis was a blessing. They wouldn't let black music through. He opened the door for black music."

dispossessed[12] as they saw a young white singer thriving to success on their own music. Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton launched the controversy over the song "Hound Dog," which she claimed to have written. When questioned further on the matter she replied that, although the song had been composed by Leiber and Stoller, she had transformed it: "They gave me the words, but I changed it around and did it my way" (190). Bertrand remarks that Thornton's explanation "ingenuously stresses artist interpretation as the sole yardstick with which to measure authenticity" (190).[13] Cultural historian Greil Marcus goes even further in clarifying the debate as he brushes those arguments, which he views as irrelevant, aside. After all, Elvis did exactly what Thornton had done. He had "changed the song completely, from the tempo to the words, and cut Thornton's version to shreds […]. All you can say is this was Elvis's music because he made it his own" (Marcus, *Mystery Train* 172).[14]

Yet, Presley's relationship to African-American culture and music "represented something much more significant than cultural misappropriation" (Bertrand 199) notably because Elvis had a great following among the African-American community.[15] Moreover, Elvis felt a sincere appreciation for the Black people's music. When discussing music, Elvis was never reluctant to talk about his musical roots and his indebtedness to his African-American predecessors "rock'n'roll was here a long time before I came along. Nobody can sing that kind of music like colored people" (Bertrand 199). Furthermore, he was never afraid of mixing with his black counterparts[16] or taking part in African-American charities. On July 20, 1956 the African-American newspaper *Memphis World* reported that the previous evening Elvis had "crack[ed] Memphis segregation laws by attending the Fairgrounds Memphis amusement park on East Parkway, during what is designated as 'colored night'" (Guralnick and Jorgensen 76). In December 1956 he showed up at the WDIA Goodwill Revue held at the Ellis Auditorium in Memphis to benefit needy black children. As B.B. King recalled: "[F]or a young white boy to show up at an all-black function took guts" (Bertrand 203). Thus, Presley's attitude, his sincere appreciation of blues and gospel music contributed to change "the rules of the popular music game" (203). Although rock and roll fostered "racial ambivalence" (234), it may not have revolutionized race relations in the land of Jim Crow. It however paved the way for greater tolerance between both communities, substantiating Bertrand assessment that popular culture is also political, particularly in a region where "[m]usic gave pleasure, wisdom and shelter" (Marcus, *Mystery Train* 142). Elvis had become the voice of a generation who had started rebelling against the social conformism which prevailed in America at the time. As Bob Dylan confessed, "When I first heard Elvis's voice, I just knew that I wasn't going to work for anybody,

[12] Concerning the notion of dispossession see Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952), which probably best describes what the African-American community were feeling at the time, ""Dispossession! *Dis*-possession is the word!" I went on. "They've tried to dispossess us of our manhood and womanhood! Of our childhood and adolescence [...] And I'll tell you something else – if we don't resist, pretty soon they'll succeed! These are the days of dispossession, the season of homelessness, the time of evictions." (343).

[13] WDIA DJ and r&b singer Rufus Thomas wrote an answer record entitled "Bear Cat." This was an "old device in the R&B game: a great way to catch a free ride on the coat tails of somebody else's hit" (Goldman 140).

[14] See Marcus "It is vital to remember that Elvis was the first young Southern white to sing rock'n'roll, something he copied from no one but made on the spot" (Marcus, *Mystery Train* 155) a claim which contradicts Goldman's overtly biased judgement on Presley: "Elvis Presley was from his earliest years a marvellous mimic" (149).

[15] The black magazine *Tan* noted that "Elvis has a lot of Negro fans" (Bertrand 203).

[16] In *Careless Love. The Unmaking of Elvis Presley*, Peter Guralnick mentions a visit Elvis made in 1961 to Johnny Bragg, the lead singer of the Prisonaires, who had been incarcerated at the Tennessee State Prison for parole violation: "Elvis toured the various workshops, prison dining hall and death house, and spoke briefly with Bragg, asking if he needed a lawyer or if there was anything at all he could do for him" (Guralnick 97).

and nobody was going to be my boss…. Hearing him for the first time was like bursting out of jail. I thank God for Elvis" (Sounes 48).

Although Bertrand claims that 1955 was a pivotal year in the history of rock and roll, things seem a little more complex.[17] While Elvis's signature with RCA records on November 21, 1955 provided him with nationwide recognition and worldwide fame, as an artist, he was already being imperceptibly drawn into mainstream teenage culture, as both R.C.A. and his manager—Colonel Tom Parker—progressively reduced the young artist's form of expression into a commodity.[18] Finally, the danger he represented was neutered when he was drafted into the army on March 25, 1958.[19] Meanwhile, shallow musical clones like Ricky Nelson—the first teen idol to use television to promote his musical career—provided rock and roll with a socially more respectable image.[20] By the end of the decade the rock and roll scene had begun dwindling away as many of its heroes began disappearing. While touring Australia in 1957, Little Richard, feeling the call of religion, decided to quit at the height of his career. On February 3, 1959, a day which "for many rock and roll fans [came to be known as] a day of infamy" (Aquila 75), Buddy Holly died in a plane crash. A year later, on 17 April 1960, Eddie Cochran was killed in a car accident in the United Kingdom. Yet, in a brief span (1954-1957), rock and roll had changed popular music forever as it opened a window onto a welter of unexplored musical and social possibilities.

"I hear America singing" (Walt Whitman): Bob Dylan and the counterculture

As the 1950s passed into the 1960s "[t]hings were pretty sleepy on the Americana music scene" (Dylan, *Chronicles* 5) yet the social dissent which had begun simmering in the mid-fifties gained new immediacy. As the new decade dawned, the world the Establishment was offering the younger generation was no longer viewed as acceptable. However, the growing protest was not, paradoxically, grounded in failure but, as Theodore Roszack observed, in "the success of high industrial economy" (Roszack xii). The need for radical social change called the myth of material progress into question. America's youth was yearning for another kind of life and, as the old world was beginning to crack, uniformity was progressively giving way to diversity as everything "was called into question" (Roszack xxvi). In 1956, Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl* had announced the forthcoming generational war[21] and in the midst of this incipient revolution, Robert Zimmerman, a young folk singer from the North Country, left the northern wilderness for New

[17] On the reasons why 1955 was a pivotal date in American popular music see Richard A. Peterson's insightful article "Why 1955? Explaining the Advent of rock Music," *Popular Music* 9 / 1 (1990): 97-116.

[18] See Greil Marcus, *Bob Dylan by Greil Marcus. Writings 1968-2010*. Marcus notes that "[i]n the record industry, music is referred to as "product" (Marcus, *Bob Dylan* 13).

[19] In 1969 when Elvis returned to live performances he referred to his career in the sixties, when he was discharged from the army and began making films, in a self-mocking statement. His words give us a rather interesting insight into how he must have felt at the time: "[…] hair flying everywhere. He's got to be a weirdo man. I tell you, stone cold, natural freak. Man. That's why I haven't been in public in 9 years. That's why they put me away. Boy. They said get him out of here." Live at the International Hotel, Las Vegas, Nevada, August 3, 1969, dinner show. The show can be found on the bootleg record: *The Return of a Prodigy*.

[20] In *Chronicles*, Dylan observes that Nelson "was singing bleached out lyrics" (14).

[21] According to Roszack, Ginsberg's poem stands as a "founding document of the counter culture" (67). The opening verses of the poem clearly underscore the feeling of alienation and distress felt by the young generation: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked,/dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix,/angelhead hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of the night,/[…], (Ginsberg 134). Ginsberg gave his first reading of *Howl* at the Six gallery in the North Beach district of San Francisco the night of October 7, 1955.

York to further his nascent career. The young Bob arrived in New York in January 1961 where he would soon become the "incarnation of the counterculture" (Gates 1).

The folk music revival, which had begun in the 1940s, had been recently boosted by the payola scandal of 1960 which revealed that "music labels commonly paid bribes to get pop records played on the radio" (Sounes 68) hence, in contrast to what appeared on pop charts, the authenticity and freshness of folk music seemed "in tune with the feelings for social change in America" (101). Bob Dylan's primary location while in New York was Greenwich Village where he made a living playing in music venues and clubs (Gerde's Folk City on West 4th Street, the Gaslight Club on MacDougal Street…). He would perform at *hootnannies* or open-mike nights, encountering the leading musicians of the Bohemian subculture such as Dave Van Ronk, Pete Seeger, the Clancy Brothers and Joan Baez, who would soon play a central role in his career. Dylan learnt everything he could from those experienced artists taking "the best of their material and stage craft for himself" (100). The young Dylan's Guthriesque style, the slight nasal twine of his voice and the rhetorical lyrics of his songs soon caught the attention of the folk and jazz critic Robert Shelton[22] as well as the legendary John Hammond, who would soon sign the young artist with Columbia records. As the early stages of his career unfolded, the young songsmith produced songs which mirrored the "broken world [he] was living in" (Dylan, *Chronicles* 108). Dylan used folk music to reflect contemporarily the complexities of society as folk songs were the "way [he] explored the universe" (18) and its recesses. According to him, folk music transcends "immediate culture" (27). Folk songs tell stories[23] whose multiple facets reflect the lives of the invisible mass. The kaleidoscopic nature of his songs contributes to their great liveliness and though Christopher Ricks may question the way in which Dylan re-performs certain of his songs (Ricks 15-16),[24] there is something essential about the way in which he re-performs them[25] and which is at variance with Ricks's claim. Not only does a song live, but the way in which its author performs it reflects his changing mood and feelings, highlighting aspects of the song which may not have been perceived when first recorded. Re-performing a song is undoubtedly a means of reflecting Dylan's metamorphic nature, as he once told David Gates: "I don't think I'm tangible to myself. I mean, I think one thing today and I think another thing tomorrow. I change during the course of a day. I wake and I'm one person, and when I go to sleep I know for certain I'm somebody else" (Gates 1).

In an interview with Robert Shelton, Dylan had dwelled on the way in which he performed his songs: "Nobody else gives my songs life. It's up to me to do it ... But those songs have a life of their own, too" (Shelton 1). And, when artists such as Elvis Presley, Richie Havens, Nina Simone, Odetta, and Peter, Paul and Mary perform Dylan songs, they communicate a sense of uniqueness to them as they make the songs their own.

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[22] Robert Shelton wrote in 1961 "Mr. Dylan's voice is anything but pretty. He is consciously trying to recapture the rude beauty of a Southern field hand in melody on his back porch. All the "husk and bark" are left on his notes, and searing intensity pervades his songs […] Mr. Dylan's highly personalized approach toward folk song is still evolving. He has been sopping up influences like a sponge". The following bootleg records give an accurate account of Bob Dylan's talent in his incipient career: *Bob Dylan. The Minnesota Tapes* and *Bob Dylan. Gaslight Tapes*. *The Minnesota Tapes* were recorded in December 1961 and *The Gaslight Tapes* in 1962. Listen also to the recent official release *Bob Dylan. The Witmark Demos: 1962-1964*.

[23] "folksingers could sing songs like an entire book, but only in a few verses" (Dylan, *Chronicles* 39).

[24] "Any performance, like any translation, necessitates sacrifice, and I believe that it would be misguided, and even unwarrantably protective of Dylan, to suppose that his decisions as to sacrifice in performance could never be misguided" (Ricks 15).

[25] See "Bob Dylan est avant tout une voix". Entretien avec Greil Marcus. Propos recueillis par Bruno Lesprit (64). In this interview Marcus highlights the importance of re-performance in Dylan's songs.

Dylan's songs explore social history in an archaeological way as they tell the "underground story" (Dylan, *Chronicles* 103), unravelling the lives of those who go unnoticed. But, above all, they define the "way [he feels] about the world" (Dylan 51). His songs tell stories which are true to life and, as a poet he finds ways to express the inexpressible: "[the] songs are my lexicon. I believe the songs" (Gates 1). The vividness and realism of the stories are not specific to folk music but also evocative of the blues. Dylan's songs were influenced by one of the most influential and elusive bluesmen of all time: Robert Johnson. Johnson's realism, as Guralnick notes, is characterised by the fact that he "intentionally developed themes in his songs; each song made a statement, both metaphorical and real" (Guralnick, *Searching* 37) which is, of course, also true of Dylan's songs.

His early songs are imbued with the influence of Hank Williams, whose "recorded songs were the archetype rules of poetic song writing" (Dylan, *Chronicles* 96).[26] Not to mention the influence of the legendary American bard, Woody Guthrie, the "father of American folk music" (Sounes 25). Bob's songs weave fragments, "offbeat phrases" (Dylan, *Chronicles* 138), archaic words, strange images which are out of time and space. The visual imagery in Dylan's songs owes probably a lot to Dylan's interest in the visual arts as he went "through a phase when he spread photographs, postcards, and other pictures across the floor and walked around them, looking for ideas" (Sounes 173). Besides, Dylan's writing was influenced in many ways by the beat writing as his first and only novel, *Tarantula* (1971), attests to. He has been thus considered by critics as the "[s]piritual heir to the beat poets" (Sounes 183). Yet, he was also influenced by poets like Carl Sandburg, who believed the poet's role as a witness would "create a new cultural consciousness by reflecting and synthesizing facets of the American experience in his time" (John E. Hallwas xiv).[27]

Against the backdrop of the Cold War, and of growing social unrest, Bob Dylan songs reflected his social concerns. They encompass both social and political issues at stake in the early 1960s. "Talkin' Central Park Mugger Blues"[28] is a satire of the middle-class. As for "Blowin' in the Wind"[29] it was viewed by Howard Sounes as the foundation of his career (Sounes 150). While not only reflecting the atmosphere of the time, the song was rapidly associated with the struggle for reform in America, as Christopher Ricks notes, it "staves off hopelessness and hopefulness, disillusionment and illusion" (Ricks 322), and it soon became the anthem of the civil rights movement (Sounes 174). A number of Dylan songs reflected his deep political beliefs concerning the issue of racial discrimination with "The Death of Emmett Till" or "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll." The latter tells the story of a drunken landowner, William Zantzinger, who killed

[26] In *Chronicles*, Dylan stresses Williams's influence on his own song writing process: "[…] his words – all of his syllables are divided up so they make perfect mathematical sense. You can learn a lot about the structure of songwriting by listening to his records, and I listened to them a lot and had them internalized" (Dylan, *Chronicles* 96).

[27] Dylan's encounter with Sandberg turned out to be a disappointment as the old poet had "never heard of Bob" (Sounes 182).

[28] See Sounes for a detailed discussion on this song (Sounes 122-23).

[29] "Blowin' in The Wind" is "Dylan's arrangement of a traditional slave song called "No More Auction Block." He borrowed the latter's melody and meter outline, which is a common practice in folk music" (Manzella 24). Using melodies of folk standards and adding lyrics of his own was something Guthrie and Dylan were familiar with. The melody of his song "Song to Woody" was adapted from Woody Guthrie's song "1913 Massacre" (Sounes 110). "Blowin' in The Wind" was released on Dylan's second album *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, alongside "Masters of War."

his 51-year-old hotel maid, Hattie Carroll.[30] Dylan tells the story with "the economy of a news reporter and the imagery of a poet" (176). "Only a Pawn in Their Game" depicts the killing of the field secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Medgan Evers in which Dylan portrays the murderer as a pawn in a game of ignorance and hatred, who is, like Evers, a victim of a prejudiced society. The Civil rights' issue was a recurrent concern in Dylan's works as the following passage from *Tarantula* attests to: "in gary, indiana, colored man shot twenty times thru the head—coroner says cause of death is unknown…" (Dylan, *Tarentula* 136) throwing light, once more, on the absurdity of racial prejudice. With "Masters of War," probably one of his best anti-war songs, its acerbic and fierce lyrics voiced the anger of a whole generation bewildered by the absurdity of war, and the terrifying prospect of the arms build-up, which was driving the world onto the brink of a nuclear holocaust. The song excoriates the Establishment and the military-industrial complex deemed responsible for the deaths of thousands. A few years later, Dylan wrote in his novel that "the world is run by those that never listen to music anyway" (Dylan, *Tarentula* 94),[31] people who are devoid of feelings or compassion, people beyond redemption. In January 1964, "The Times They Are A-Changin'"[32] expressed the youth's dissatisfaction with society; it is, as Christopher Ricks remarks, a song which "admonishes" the Establishment (Ricks 265). The song's acorn—the ancient adage, *Tempora mutantur Times change*—enables Dylan to criticise the political and social system of the time while expressing the young generation's urge for social and political change. However, despite Dylan's ability to take the pulse of his surroundings and flesh it out in his songs, he has always refused to be viewed as a protest singer:

> The term "protest singer" didn't exist any more than the term "singer-songwriter." You were a performer or you weren't, that was about it—a folksinger or not one. "Songs of dissent" was a term people used but even that was rare. I tried to explain later I didn't think I was a protest singer, that there'd been a screw up. I didn't think I was protesting anything any more than I thought Woody Guthrie songs were protesting anything. I didn't think of Woody as a protest singer (Dylan, *Chronicles* 82-83).[33]

Even though he uses the term "poet musician" (Dylan 98), which probably defines him best,[34] it seems impossible to overlook Dylan as a major figure of the counterculture. His so-called protest songs, which still remain relevant nowadays, express the concerns of a man for the world he was living in. Yet, Dylan refused to be active politically and, during the escalation of the conflict in Vietnam, as Sounes opines, he "seemed oblivious to the politics" (Sounes 256) as he refused to participate to the anti-war concert staged at Carnegie Hall—organized by Joan

[30] The song was recorded on Dylan's third album entitled *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, alongside with "Only a Pawn in their Game" and the album's title song.

[31] This may be a possible echo of William Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice* (1600). Lorenzo "The man that hath no music in himself,/Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,/Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils,/The motions of his spirit are dull as night,/And his affections dark as Erebus:/Let no such man be trusted:– mark the music." (V, i, 83-88).

[32] See Christopher Ricks's insightful analysis of the title-refrain pages 260-61.

[33] See *Tarantula* (122). Dylan's opinion on Guthrie not being a protest singer seems to contradict the opinion expressed in his autobiography. When questioned by John Lomax on so-called "complaining songs" the blues singer Blind Willie McTell–who was eulogized by Dylan in "Blind Willie McTell" (1983) which was released in 1991–was rather reluctant to answer Lomax's question. However, McTell said those songs concerned both blacks and whites. See *Blind Willie McTell. 1927-1940 The Classic Years. Atlanta*, disc D, track 2.

[34] See Robert Shelton's interview in which Dylan tells the critic: "I consider myself a poet first and a musician second. I live like a poet and I'll die like a poet" (Shelton 4).

Baez, on September 25, 1965—urging young men to resist being drafted. In July 1969 he refused to participate to the Woodstock Festival.[35] Dylan's apathy towards certain political events induced reactions among some of his fans. The Dylan Liberation Front founded by an obsessive fan—A. J. Weberman—organised a demonstration in January 1971, outside Dylan's house on MacDougal Street, during which the demonstrators chanted "Free Bob Dylan!", "Free Bob Dylan from Himself!" (Sounes 309),[36] "Dylan's Brain Belongs to the People." Although Dylan's songs told stories which, to an extent, were true to life, he didn't want to be viewed as the spokesman of a generation. When questioned about politics and if he viewed himself as a politician, Dylan replied "Well, I guess so. I've got my own party though"[37] clearly underscoring his sense of individualism, which is probably best illustrated by what he writes in his autobiography as he recalls the way in which he had been introduced at one of the Newport Folk Festivals by Ronnie Gilbert: "And here he is… take him, you know him, he's yours." I had failed to sense the ominous forebodings in the introduction. Elvis had never been introduced like that. "Take him, he's yours!" What a crazy thing to say! Screw that. As far as I knew I didn't belong to anybody then or now" (Dylan, *Chronicles* 115).

As Dylan progressively moved away from protest songs, as his work became more introspective, the wedge between him and the protest movement grew further. His acute sense of individualism and, as Nigel Williamson avers, his deep sensitivity prevented him from becoming "deeply politicized" (Williamson 42) while also keeping his fans at bay.

When the Poet Meets the King

Few singers have been so involved in the events of their time as Elvis Presley and Bob Dylan. And perhaps, few popular singers have been so important in the understanding of American society from the mid-fifties to the mid-seventies. Although drawing a comparison between two such artists may appear somewhat of a daunting task, I will try to show that both artists shared quite a lot in common while remaining, at the same time, unique. Sociologist Howard Becker best described the way in which musicians were perceived at the time: "the musician is conceived of as an artist who possesses a mysterious gift setting him apart from all other people" (Becker 85). This, therefore, may explain the influence both artists exerted on society as they probably elicited greater respect and admiration from youths than politicians.

It has never been clearly established but we may assume, on the evidence at hand that both artists didn't actually meet, even though Bob Johnston tried to arrange a meeting between them. Unfortunately, the project never came through, as Johnston recalls, "I tried to get them to record together. I think Dylan would have done it in a second, […]. But Presley's manager, Colonel Tom Parker, blocked it for reasons unknown" (Sounes 286) .Yet, if both artists had a mutual respect for each other's work, Presley's attitude toward Dylan was seemingly ambivalent. Musically speaking, Elvis was one of Bob Dylan's heroes. The King was, amongst others, one of the poet's major influences, as Dylan's reaction to Elvis's death attests to: "It was so sad. I had a breakdown! I broke down… one of the very few times I went over my whole life. I went over my

[35] See Sounes for the reasons why Dylan had no intention of appearing at Woodstock (294-98).

[36] Dylan recalls the event in his autobiography, see *Chronicles*, 117-18. Alan Jules Weberman is probably the archetype of the obsessive fan. He claims inventing Dylanology: the detailed study and textual analysis of Dylan's lyrics. Weberman later invented garbology – a "science" based on what one could deduce about the Dylan's art from what he found in his waste bins. Bob Dylan, however, participated to the Bangladesh Concert staged at the Madison Square Garden on August 1, 1971.

[37] The interview is available on the CD, *Rock Report. Bob Dylan. Blood on the Tracks*.

whole childhood. I didn't talk to anyone for a week after Elvis died. If it wasn't for Elvis and Hank Williams, I couldn't be doing what I am doing today." (Shelton 2). Throughout his career, Dylan recorded a number of Elvis songs and particularly the Sun recordings.[38] While recording his second album in 1962 Dylan recorded a version of "That's All Right, Mama,"[39] an almost note-perfect copy of Elvis's version (Williamson 252). In the early 1970s, when his career slowed down he attended concerts by other artists. He went to see Elvis's concert at Madison Square Garden (1972) as he tried maintaining interest into what was going on, on the American musical scene. Dylan had always shown great interest in Elvis's musical career. In 1969, the English rock columnist and critic Ray Connolly recalls a telephone conversation he had with Dylan the day after seeing Elvis's latest performance in Las Vegas. Dylan was extremely interested and curious about Presley's performance: "Was he good? Really good? Who was in the band? Were the Jordanaires with him? And Scotty Moore on guitar? What did he sing? Did he do "That's All Right, Mama" and the Sun Records stuff?" The questions poured out" (Connolly 80).

In his controversial cover album *Self-Portrait* (1970)[40] Dylan recorded another Presley song "Blue Moon." In 1973 he recorded two other Presley songs which appeared on *Dylan (A Fool such as I)*, on which we can hear him unconvincingly crooning his way through "Can't Help Falling in Love" and "A Fool such as I." Over twenty years later in 1994 Dylan went into New York's Sony studios to record a few Elvis related songs.[41] He recorded "Anyway You Want Me," "Lawdy Miss Clawdy" as well as two up-tempo versions of "Money Honey." On 16 August 2009, while playing in Nevada, Dylan paid tribute to Elvis on the thirty-second anniversary of his death, as he convincingly sang, for the first time, Elvis's 1957 hit "Heartbreak Hotel."[42] On the album *Under the Red Sky* (1990), Dylan's song "TV Talkin' Song" while depicting the noxious effect of television which brainwashes those who watch it, mentions Elvis's habit of shooting TV screens:

> It will lead you into some strange pursuits
> Lead you to the land of forbidden fruits
> It will scramble up your head and drag your brain about
> Sometimes you gotta do like Elvis did and shoot the damn thing out.[43]

If Elvis had revolutionized rhythm and blues, Dylan revolutionized folk music. At the Newport Folk Festival, on July 25, 1965 Pete Seeger had expected Bob Dylan to give an "acoustic performance of socially aware songs" (Sounes 220). When he performed them with an electric guitar, Dylan received a hostile response from the audience. The use of electrical guitars was viewed by Folk purists as subversive, as Oscar Brand, avers "[t]he electric guitar represented capitalism… the people who were selling out" (221). In spite of the traditionalists finding it

[38] See Sounes, "Bob had always admired Presley's Sun Recordings" (286).
[39] This song is available on the bootleg record *The Freewheelin' Outtakes*. Another version was recorded with Johnny Cash during the Nashville Skyline sessions. It is available on *Johnny Cash & Bob Dylan. The Nashville Tapes*, CBS 0269. The album was not officially released.
[40] See Greil Marcus. "What's this shit?" were Marcus' opening words in the album review he wrote for *Rolling Stones* magazine on 23 July 1970 (Marcus, *Bob Dylan* 7).
[41] The recordings were not released. However, they are available on the bootleg album *The Fourth Time Around. Genuine Bootleg series, vol. 4*, Scorpio Records, 2008.
[42] Harveys Lake Tahoe Outdoor Arena, Stateline, Nevada, 16 August 2009. The song is available on *Bob Dylan. Lake Tahoe, 2009*.
[43] *Bob Dylan 1962-2001 Lyrics* (549).

outrageous, Dylan, who loved rock and roll, believed in amplified music and was thus, like Elvis before him, "a rebel in the music that made him famous" (Marcus 182).

During the 1960s[44] Elvis was contracted to Hollywood where he was making dull and interchangeable movies. As the film were getting worse and the music even worse[45] it became obvious that he was "neither interested in, nor satisfied with the music that was being released in his name" (Guralnick, *Careless Love* 207). However, the span of his home recordings[46] attests to his continuous interest on what was going on the musical scene as he became acquainted with Bob Dylan's music while listening to records by Peter, Paul & Mary, Odetta and Nina Simone, indicating that Elvis tuned into contemporary folk music. Elvis's home recording of "Blowin' in the Wind" illustrates the influence of Peter, Paul & Mary. His recording of a Dylan composition which had yet to be recorded by Dylan, "Tomorrow Is a Long Time" (Guralnick 233) has been considered by Dylan himself as the best version of the song. During the early seventies Elvis recorded another of Dylan's songs, "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right," which was released on the album *Elvis (Fool)* and an eleven-minute jam illustrates Elvis's "freewheeling spirit" (Jorgensen 363). During the same session Elvis threw in a verse of another Dylan composition "I Shall Be Released" and he sang it "with a kind of feeling that indicated that this song should have been the record" (Jorgensen 333). Yet Elvis's attitude toward Dylan was ambivalent, as Guralnick observes, "much as [Elvis] may have detested Dylan's vocal quality[47] and equally abrasive cultural politics" (Guralnick, *Careless Love* 233), he was probably envious of the freedom that artists like Dylan, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones enjoyed and which, he himself had once enjoyed.

As Elvis's career at Hollywood was coming to an end he wanted to perform again before live audiences and NBC proposed him to do a TV Special which was to be aired in December 1968. Presley's manager, Colonel Tom Parker, wanted to limit the show to Elvis performing Christmas songs. But Elvis and Steve Binder were adamant about it not being some corny Christmas show.[48] Elvis was anguished at whether or not he still had the magic to capture a TV audience since his last public performance, which dated back to March, 25, 1961 when he performed at Bloch Arena in Pearl Harbor. The show was a fantastic success and it "reestablished his place as a dominant force in American music and culture" (Jorgensen 263). The show's climax rested on W. Earl Brown's new song "If I Can Dream" and while the song was a statement about peace and brotherhood it is rather, as Guralnick writes, "the pain and conviction and raw emotion in Elvis's voice" (Guralnick, *Careless Love* 310) that commands our attention. While listening to Elvis we cannot but think of the famous speech Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. made during the Civil Rights March in Washington, DC on August 28, 1963. Its resonance was all the more evident since Dr King had been assassinated in Memphis in April 1968. Although Elvis never claimed nor even expressed the desire of being a protest singer he was extremely

[44] A period described by Greil Marcus as a period during which Elvis "disappeared into an oblivion of respectability and security" (Marcus, *Mystery Train* 133).

[45] Listen to Elvis, in January 1966, bursting into laughter during the soundtrack recordings for the film *Spinout*, as he considers the ridiculous lyrics of the song he is recording. This is available on the bootleg album *"Cut Me & I Bleed". The Other Side of Elvis. Alternate, Humorous & Sometimes Risque Studio, Home & Live Recorded Tracks*, Double "G", DG 003/1999. Track 13 "Beach Shack" (Takes 1/3).

[46] Jorgensen observes that "[s]inging and playing music with friends had always been part of Elvis's home life," (Jorgensen 204).

[47] Elvis had once said "My mouth feels like Bob Dylan's been sleeping in it" (Guralnick 223).

[48] See Guralnick for a detailed description of the show's rehearsals, (*Careless Love* 294-317). See also Greil Marcus who notes it "was the finest music of his life. If ever there was music that bleeds, this was it" (Marcus, *Mystery Train* 139). Listen to *Elvis. The Complete '68 Comeback special*.

aware of the changes which were taking place in America and the world, and he felt the need to sing his concern about the situation. He, therefore, decided to record Mac Davis's song "In the Ghetto (The Vicious Circle)"[49] which was, as Guralnick notes, "more in the nature of an explicit 'message song'" (331) depicting the consequences of poverty and societal indifference on a young boy growing up in the ghetto. The song clearly discussed a controversial issue at the time as it pleaded for "compassion for black youth" (332) and Elvis was, undoubtedly, convinced of "the sincerity of its message, and felt strongly about the issue" (Jorgensen 271).

But, as obvious as it may seem, what both artists shared above all was their love for music and the fact that they are profoundly American. In his biography on Dylan, Howard Sounes mentions how, in his early career, his relationships with women became problematic when they discovered "he was focused on music to the exclusion of almost everything else" (232). The importance of music and songs were, and still are, essential in Bob's life as he told Robert Shelton, who was questioning him on how he related to his songs and music: "It's not me. It's the songs. I'm just the postman. I deliver the songs. That's all I have in this world are those songs" (Shelton 1). Dylan gave this interview in 1978 and his words are reminiscent of those Elvis spoke, eight years earlier, on receiving the Jaycee Award in January 1970: "I'd like to say that I learned very early in life that: 'Without a song the day would never end/ Without a song a man ain't got no friend/ Without a song the road would never bend/ Without a song…' So I keep singing a song" (Guralnick, *Careless Love* 429).

For Elvis, music embodied all the American dream could carry for a poor young white southerner who went from rags to riches. In Dylan's case music probably implied a more intellectual form of recognition. Yet, both artists are profoundly American and both embody the ambivalence and contradictions of their nation. The epic figure of Elvis is, without doubt, the perfect incarnation of the American dream, and his tragic death endowed him with an almost divine nature as he came to represent for many a "Christomorphic" figure[50] not to mention the numerous urban legends about him being still alive.[51] In the final years, as Greil Marcus writes, "the America that Elvis has come to symbolize so powerfully, [was] an America that only want[ed] to applaud, to say Yes and mean it" (Marcus, *Mystery Train* 189). Elvis's life and career encapsulates all the facets of the American dream: he was the rebel who changed American music forever; the good American; the conservative patriot with his Republican stances, and finally the King who had had everything and who lost it all through drugs and mismanagement. He was not only rock and roll's last icon; he personified the great American tragedy. Yet, we are left with his legacy "a music that still sounds new, that still breaks thing open" (Marcus 161).[52]

As for Dylan, he truly felt American, and probably still does, as he writes in his autobiography "[b]eing raised in America, the country of freedom and independence, I had always cherished the values and ideals of equality and liberty. I was determined to raise my children with those ideals" (Dylan, *Chronicles* 115). But above all his medium is and remains American, as he told Bob Shelton, who questioned him on whether he would be able to live elsewhere, Dylan replied: "[c]reatively, I couldn't live anywhere but America, because I

[49] In 1972, during the Wattsstax Festival, which was conceived as the black Woodstock, Isaac Hayes performs probably one of the most insightful songs on the subject: "Soulsville". *Isaac Hayes at WattsStax*.
[50] See David Winkler's film *Road to Graceland* (1998), which provides a possible explanation of what Elvis has come to symbolize for certain people in America.
[51] See Don Coscarelli's film *Bubba Ho-Tep* (2003), which is an amusing and interesting variation on the Elvis myth.
[52] A re-mix of "A Little Less Conversation" topped the charts in 2002.

understand the tone behind the language" (Shelton 2). Dylan may, therefore, be viewed as true heir of Emerson's American Scholar "[t]he scholar is that man who must take up into himself all the ability of the time, all the contributions of the past, all the hopes of the future."[53] While peeling back the many layers of America's history, he has not only produced a work which is deeply American, but has portrayed the complex American social, political and popular landscape in a way no other songwriter has.

The subversive nature of music[54] dates back to Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*. In both works, the Greek philosopher submits music to complex scrutiny. Plato viewed music as a possible threat for the dominant ideology as it could possibly induce uncontrolled passions amongst youths, either through subversive lyrics or inappropriate rhythms. The advent of Elvis Presley and rock and roll, the folk revival, which occurred under Bob Dylan's impulse, illustrate how music was an inherent part of the struggle for the social change, which took place at the core of American society, from the mid-fifties to the mid-seventies.

While Elvis opened a new musical frontier that impacted American society, his sad and tragic coda symbolized the excesses of the American dream. As for Dylan's ongoing career, it is here to remind us of the critical importance of music in popular culture, as an influential instrument of social and political change. But it is probably Bruce Springsteen who best summarized the legacy of both artists in his speech, which inducted Bob Dylan into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, in January 1988: "Dylan was a revolutionary. The way Elvis freed our bodies, Bob freed our minds."

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[53] Emerson 99.

[54] The Greek word *mousikē* has a wider meaning than the English word "music". In Ancient Greece, poetry and music were immingled. That is "why [for Plato] this stage of education [was] crucial. For rhythm and harmony penetrate deeply into the mind and take a most powerful hold on it". Consequently, according to the Greek philosopher music had to be carefully monitored by the authorities. *The Republic*, Book III, 401d-401e (98).

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