

**AMERICAN CELEBRITY AND JEWISH IDENTITY:
THE ENIGMA OF BOB DYLAN**

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Introduction

In a recent essay on American Jewish popular culture, Donald Weber observes that “popular culture both enables the psychosocial ordeal of “Americanization” and provides opportunities for cultural dissonance, [and thus] Jewish popular culture offers a rich testament to how that complex dialectic of acculturation and resistance works.”¹ Popular culture, that is, is born of the tension between the powerful tendency toward integration on the one hand and the persistent impulse toward ethnic survival on the other. Though Weber focuses on the first half of the twentieth century, the observation is just as applicable to the later period—and in particular, I would suggest, to the early 1960s. A transitional time for American Jews, the early 60s was a bridge between the height of American acculturation of the post-WWII decade and the era of Jewish revival following the Six Day War. It was also a time in which the cultural product of *celebrity*—i.e., the images of the famous in popular consciousness—attained some greater significance in American Jewish life. The confluence of these two factors—American Jewish celebrity and the early 1960s—frames the following discussion. Celebrity, as a key element of American Jewish popular culture, provides both a measure of individual integration and allows the possibility of communal reclaiming; in its 1960s expression in particular, it will be seen to encapsulate both the extent of assimilation and its limits.

The dual nature of celebrity culture in the American Jewish mind may be further explained by the notion of “Jewhooing”—as defined by historian Susan Glenn, “the

¹ Donald Weber, “Accents of the future: Jewish American popular culture,” ch. 7 in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, eds. Michael Kramer and Hana Wirth-Nesher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 130.

social mechanism for both private and public naming and claiming of Jews by other Jews.”² A commonly observable behavior of American Jews, especially those of the post-WWII generation, Jewhooing is the pointing out and listing of those Jews conspicuous in the general culture. Glenn cites her own parents and grandparents, who, “while reading the newspaper or watching television, . . . wondered out loud if this or that public figure or celebrity—perhaps with their Christian-sounding name and all-American looks—was or wasn’t a member of their tribe.”³ She then traces its history from the *Jewish Encyclopedia* of 1901-05 through several mid-century ‘Who’s Who’-type listings to the 1990s examples of contemporary comedian Adam Sandler’s “Hanukah Song” and the Jewish ‘outing’ of Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. But there is more going on here than simple ethnic pride. As Glenn suggests, Jewhooing represents a reassertion of the biological basis of Jewish identity. In an age when religious tradition and ethnic culture are the more commonly preferred and acceptable forms of identification, and at a time when conversion to Judaism is on the rise, ‘Jewish by descent’ is denigrated as regressive—it is the antisemite’s criterion, after all—and thus often suppressed. Nevertheless, such “blood logic” lies deep in the Jewish subconscious and is not so easily erased. Hence the constant Jewhooing of public personalities such as Madeline Albright—it provides a socially acceptable means of marking as Jewish the otherwise unidentified. As further implied, therefore, the activity of Jewhooing is directly related to the perceived assimilation of the Jewish celebrity at hand. Since the overwhelming majority of Jews who succeed in the general culture—especially in popular culture—tend to downplay their Jewishness in the process and often seek to ‘pass’ altogether, it becomes the special vocation of their fellow Jews to reclaim them, to ‘out’ them as co-religionists and members of the tribe. Underlying this reflexive habit may be a none-too-subtle suggestion of Jewish superiority (‘look at all the Jewish Nobel prize winners!’), as well as the pressing desire to counter negative stereotypes of Jews. But on the whole, the main motive of Jewhooing is the countering of assimilation—an unconscious attempt to

² Susan A. Glenn, “In the Blood? Consent, Descent, and the Ironies of Jewish Identity,” *Jewish Social Studies* 8:2/3 (Winter/Spring 2002), 140. The term is derived from the internet website “Jewhoo!” (itself a takeoff on “Yahoo!”), which, among other services, provides a search engine for famous Jews—inviting the visitor to ‘test’ whether any given celebrity is, in fact, Jewish.

³ *Ibid.*

reverse the very processes of social integration and de-Judaization that touch most every Jew in the modern world.

This paper is part of a larger study on the reception of celebrity in contemporary Jewish life. As students of American popular culture remind us, our cultural life is shaped in significant ways by celebrities, the select individuals we choose to reward with extraordinary public recognition, i.e., fame. In his ambitious history of the subject, *The Frenzy of Renown*, cultural historian Leo Braudy defines fame as “made up of four elements: a person and an accomplishment, their immediate publicity, and what posterity has thought about them ever since.”⁴ Yet another aspect of fame he treats is the effect ‘they’ have on ‘us’—the other side of the reciprocal relationship between the famous and their public. Absorbing their images and their stories in a way equivalent to the ancient apprehension of myth and folklore, we shape our own image and self-understanding. A form of cultural transmission, Braudy describes it as “the inheritance we all share, wittingly or unwittingly, from those figures,” and kabbalistically points to “the shards of [their] individual nature embedded in our own.”⁵ The famous thus have the capacity to affect the culture in deep ways, not through their actual persons so much as by our perceptions of them; and the greater the fame, the deeper their influence.

Woody Allen makes much the same point in his 1998 film *Celebrity*, when he has a character remark, “It’s interesting to see who we choose as our celebrities, y’know, and why, what makes them tick. You can learn a lot about a society by who it chooses to celebrate.” Coming from one of the most famous Jews in post-1960s America, Allen’s insight suggests that Jews too may be deeply influenced by Jewish celebrities, or, at the very least, see themselves reflected in the image of their heroes. Thus popular entertainers of the 1920s such as Al Jolson and Sophie Tucker gave license to their fellow Jews to ‘live it up’ in America; WWII-era stars such as Hank Greenberg and Bess Myerson suggested the possibility of excelling in fields not usually associated with Jews; musical maestros such as Oscar Hammerstein and Leonard Bernstein showed that Jews

⁴ Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and its History* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1986), 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

could make certain fields their own; high appointees such as Henry Morgenthau and Henry Kissinger paved the way toward Jewish political clout in Washington; and religious icons such as Abraham Joshua Heschel and Elie Wiesel demonstrated the applicability of Jewish spirituality to the political world at large. All these figures of renown, each in their own way, provided a dramatic and compelling model of Jewish accommodation to America and thus helped their fellow Jews do the same.

At no time in American Jewish history was this principle so evident as in the early 1960s, when an entire cadre of Jewish celebrities appeared on the cultural scene nearly simultaneously. More than a coincidence of timing, however, they shared a new characteristic of American Jewish celebrity—Jewishness. Jews were well represented in American popular culture before then, but never before had a recognizable and acknowledged Jewishness been so pronounced a part of their public personae. Among many others, there were comedians such as Mel Brooks and Lenny Bruce, songwriters such as Allan Sherman and Bob Dylan, political figures such as Arthur Goldberg and Bella Abzug, and feminist icons such as Betty Friedan and Barbra Streisand—all of whom came to public attention during the short span of time from 1961-64. It was a pivotal moment in American history, the transitional time between the black-and-white fifties and the psychedelic sixties, marked especially, and not incidentally, by the charged events of the Kennedy administration and assassination. And it was transitional for Jewish Americans as well. “In 1961,” Sandy Koufax later recalled, “a whole new world opened up for me”⁶—the same might be said to be emblematic of an entire generation. Writer Albert Goldman would call the sixties “the Jewish Decade,” when, seemingly “overnight, the Jew was raised from his traditional role of underdog or invisible man to the glory of being the most fascinating authority in America.” In one short decade, “the Jews burst suddenly into prominence in a dozen different areas of national life. They became the new heroes of commerce, art, and intellect. They scaled the social heights.”⁷ Note how Goldman assumes a relationship between the cultural prominence of the few and the social success of the many. As I shall argue, the remarkable surge of American

⁶ Sandy Koufax (with Ed Linn), *Koufax* (NY: Viking Press, 1966), 158.

⁷ Albert Goldman, “Laughtermakers” (1976), in *Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor*, Sarah Blacher Cohen, ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 85.

Jews during this era was reflected by, and to some degree influenced by, the fame and public reception of Jewish celebrity figures. And as we shall see, the Jewhooing habit dies hard—the idolization of such figures continues to this day, and its analysis has much to tell us regarding the identity dilemmas development of American Jews at the turn of the twenty-first century.

The phenomenon of early 1960s Jewish celebrity raises a number of related methodological questions. First, how shall we explain the seeming coincidence in timing? Is it merely indicative of a generational shift, or are environmental factors paramount? If the latter, how might the civil rights movement and the Kennedy years be convincingly linked to specifically Jewish experience? Second, what is the relationship between the public careers of these figures and the nature of Jewish identity in America? In what ways did their American celebrity contribute to the revival of Jewish ethnicity—a revival usually attributed to the aftereffects of the Six Day War—and hence, how might this study contribute to the scholarly reconsideration of 1967 as historical turning point? And third, what is the function of Jewish celebrity images in the construction of Jewish identity? The much-commented-upon but little-studied phenomenon of inventorying famous Jews, i.e., “Jewhooing,” has a history. We may well find that its roots lie in this period, when Jewishness first ‘came out of the closet’ as it were, when public expressions of Jewish identity first became part of our discourse. These and other questions will be explored in this paper, while focusing on the popular image and public reception of one figure in particular.

That figure is the musician Bob Dylan, whom Michael Staub, in his sourcebook of *The Jewish 1960s*, calls “the most celebrated songwriter for this generation.”⁸ In his introduction, Staub cites Dylan to illustrate the problem of Jewish definition and wonders whether the artist formerly known as Zimmerman belongs to the Jewish narrative at all, pointedly asking, “was Dylan a *Jewish* songwriter?”⁹ Of course, merely posing the question indicates some element of Jewishness in the image of Bob Dylan; but it also

⁸ Michael Staub, ed., *The Jewish 1960s*, Introduction, xxi.

⁹ Ibid.

reminds us just how contested the Jewish identity of a public figure may be. The man himself has been consistent in this regard—from the very beginning of his career, Bob Dylan rejected his ethnic background, affecting the persona of an all-American folkie and ‘man of the people.’ Even more emphatically, he conjured himself up as an orphan from nowhere. Fiercely claiming the individualist’s right to define himself without being labeled by the categories of others, he disavowed his Jewish family and Jewish heritage; and, with the exception of a brief flirtation with Hasidic Judaism, he has, at least in public, consistently denied or downplayed his own Jewish identity. Though it may seem paradoxical, the very denial of his Jewishness forms a significant part of Dylan’s Jewish image. From the moment he was ‘outed’ as a Jewish boy named Robert Allen Zimmerman—by *Newsweek* magazine in November of 1963—he has been identified in the public eye as a Jew. Thus, despite his own protestations, he became a very famous American Jew. In the end, there is no denying that Bob Dylan has always been attracted to fellow Jews, and they to him. Given the extraordinary level of his fame, and the cultural influence of celebrity in general, there is bound to be meaning in that—and hence, the nature and significance of Bob Dylan’s Jewish celebrity form my subject today. The paper will proceed in four parts, discussing in turn: 1) a synopsis of Dylan’s early career and rise to fame; 2) his Jewish associations as documented in the vast corpus of Dylan literature; 3) his iconoclastic self-invention and persistent denials of his own Jewishness; and 4) the Jewhooing of Dylan by his fellow Jews. In sum, the four sections will demonstrate sharply contrasting understandings of Dylan’s Jewishness—a set of contrasts projecting an image of Bob Dylan as the archetypal American Jew of the third generation—American insider and Jewish outsider simultaneously. Like Dylan, the third generation would find broad social acceptance while still experiencing a sense of alienation, and would resonate to both the greater culture and the demands of self in nearly equal proportions.

Dylan’s claim to Fame

Bob Dylan's rise to fame was meteoric and his legend continues to grow today. The general consensus is that he was one of the most important American artists of the twentieth century, and he is certainly one of its most famous Jews as well. In the history of American Jewish celebrity, Bob Dylan (b. 1941) was to the second half of the century what Irving Berlin (1888-1989) was to the first—the greatest songwriter of his time, a creative genius whose prolific compositions came to dominate the soundtrack of contemporary music, and a seminal figure whose achievement would inspire the popular musical careers of all to follow. And, like Berlin (born Israel Baline), he too was a “marrano” of a sort. Unconsciously emulating his predecessor (and so many others), Dylan changed his original Jewish-sounding name as he entered show business, and for the most part, attempted to escape his origins. Yet Berlin belonged to a generation of highly assimilatory Jews who had actively rejected the foreignness of their immigrant parents, whereas Dylan's escape took place in another era altogether, a time of ethnic revival in America. His relationship to his Jewishness would follow a far more complex path, and would ultimately communicate a far different message to the Jewish and non-Jewish public alike.

A riveting performer as well as a brilliant composer, the musical luminary to whom Dylan is most often compared is not Berlin, but Elvis Presley. As early as 1962 one critic hailed him as “the Elvis Presley of folk music,” and Robert Shelton, his favorite chronicler, wrote in 1965: “Many pop-music insiders regard Mr. Dylan as the most influential American performer to emerge since the rise of Elvis Presley ten years ago. Some think he is on the brink of superstardom.”¹⁰ Another Dylan scribe, Tim Riley, writes: “Dylan is the most important American rock ‘n’ roller since Presley,” suggesting that Dylan rivaled Presley in pop music celebrity, whereas the latter performer was “the only one to stake his reputation on rock ‘n’ roll verities that don’t truck in sex or dancing.”¹¹ Like Elvis, Dylan represented both the outsider rebelliousness of rock ‘n’ roll and the miscegenation of black and white musical styles—as Riley writes: “*Bob*

¹⁰ Gil Turner, “Bob Dylan-A New Voice Singing New Songs,” *Sing Out!*, October-November, 1962; Robert Shelton, “Pop Singers and Song Writers Racing Down Dylan’s Road,” *The New York Times*, August 27, 1965; both reprinted in Craig McGregor, ed., *Bob Dylan: A Retrospective* (NY: Da Capo Press, 1972), 23, 78.

¹¹ Tim Riley, *Hard Rain: A Dylan Commentary* (NY: Da Capo Press, 1999), 7.

Dylan [his 1st album] was the sound of a young man trying to make sense of a black man's heritage, which made it a rock 'n' roll effort in the tradition of Dylan's idol Elvis Presley, . . ."¹² On the other hand, he transcended the King by expanding the art form of rock music into entirely new aesthetic and intellectual territory. Picking up on that distinction, rock star Bruce Springsteen introduced Dylan at his 1988 induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame thus: "Bob freed your mind the way Elvis freed your body."¹³ In short, Bob Dylan was the Elvis for a new generation. A final quote in this regard:

There is no denying Bob Dylan's iconic status. His face, with its expression of worry and loneliness, became as famous as Presley's. Dylan was the Presley for middle-class whites, born just after the second world war—the figure who symbolized their era, marking it off musically from that of the previous cohort. He was the outsider, when everyone wanted to be outsiders. To fulfil the role, Dylan had to be an ambiguous outsider—the outsider playing the insider-as-outsider.¹⁴

In the end, what makes Bob Dylan truly unique was that he was *both* Irving Berlin *and* Elvis Presley. In a memorable phrase contained in one of his many classic songs, "Desolation Row" (from the 1965 album, "Highway 61 Revisited"), he describes himself as "Einstein disguised as Robin Hood"—that is, his true self behind the scenes is the archetypal Jewish genius, while his public persona is the dashing goy Errol Flynn played in the movies, the pop star as romantic renegade. Indeed, his art flows directly from this contradiction: "Dylan's relationship with himself has always been at the heart of his best work—the way the man who was born Robert Zimmerman communes with the songs, odyssey, and mystique of Bob Dylan."¹⁵ It is this very conflict, between the reality of his background and the image he created of himself, that infuses his music with its tension, its anger, its beauty.

¹² *Ibid.*, 36.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁴ Michael Billig, *Rock 'n' Roll Jews* (Syracuse University Press, 2001), 118.

¹⁵ Riley, *op. cit.*, 271-2.

Dylan first attained notice as a performer in 1961, his first year in New York City. Acquiring an enthusiastic following on the MacDougal Street folk scene as well as a growing reputation among his fellow performers, he was simultaneously “discovered” by *New York Times* critic Robert Shelton and legendary Columbia Records producer John Hammond. After attending Dylan’s opening night performance at a prominent Greenwich Village club, Shelton immediately interviewed the young phenom and rushed home to write the first major newspaper review of Bob Dylan. Published in the *Times* on September 29, 1961, the review simply *kvelled* over the newcomer: “A bright new face in folk music is appearing at Gerde’s Folk City. Although only 20 years old, Bob Dylan is one of the most distinctive stylists to play in a Manhattan cabaret in months. . . . Mr. Dylan’s highly personalized approach toward folk song is still evolving. He has been sopping up influences like a sponge. . . . But if not for every taste, his music-making has the mark of originality and inspiration, all the more noteworthy for his youth.” Commenting on his appearance, Shelton wrote: “Resembling a cross between a choir boy and a beatnik, Mr. Dylan has a cherubic look and a mop of tousled hair . . . His clothes may need a bit of tailoring, but . . . there is no doubt that he is bursting at the seams with talent.” Intentionally or not, he chooses the Christian-tinged “choir boy” and “cherubic” to describe the young Jew; no mention is made of Bob Dylan’s Jewish background.¹⁶

The success of the Folk City club date led to his signing with Columbia Records. Made in late 1961, Bob Dylan’s first record album was released on March 19, 1962. Though not commercially successful, the taste of public notice only spurred him to accelerate his rise to fame. The first album contained only two original compositions, “Talkin’ New York” and “Song to Woody,” and it was during that winter that he first began writing songs in earnest. In the spring of 1962, he wrote what became perhaps his most famous song, “Blowin’ in the Wind,” and soon began recording a second album that would nearly consist of all original material. He spent the next several months busily composing new songs and honing his performance style. On April 12, 1963, he gave a

¹⁶ Robert Shelton, “Bob Dylan: A Distinctive Folk-Song Stylist,” *New York Times*, September 29, 1961; reprinted in McGregor, 17-18.

concert at Town Hall that would establish him “as *the* major new voice in folk music.”¹⁷ His new status was confirmed a few weeks later, as Peter, Paul, & Mary’s harmonized version of “Blowin’ in the Wind” became a popular hit. On May 27, Columbia released the new album, “The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan.”¹⁸ In addition to “Blowin’ in the Wind,” it included Dylan classics “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall,” written against the background of the Cuban missile crisis, and “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right,” written against the background of a Dylan romantic crisis. During that auspicious summer of 1963, Bob Dylan was quickly becoming the darling of the folk music world, and a hero to its close ally, the civil rights movement. In early July, he accompanied Pete Seeger and Theodore Bikel on a SNCC-sponsored voter registration drive in Mississippi. Later that month, the rising young star was invited to headline the Newport Folk Festival together with Seeger, Bikel, Peter, Paul, & Mary, and Joan Baez, and in August he performed at the March on Washington and stood by as Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. He became a fully confirmed star with his next major concert, on October 12 at Carnegie Hall in New York City. And all the while he kept silent regarding his true name and background.

1964 was a transitional year for Dylan. He released two new albums, “The Times They Are A-Changin’” in January and “Another Side of Bob Dylan” in August. The title song of the first had become his signature song in the wake of the Kennedy assassination, and defined the worldview of a generation. The album, comprised of all original material from the previous year, included other classic songs such as “With God on Our Side,” “Only a Pawn in Their Game,” and “When the Ship Comes In.” But such politically-tinged material was no longer of primary interest to the songwriter who began to move toward more personal, inwardly-directed compositions such as “I Shall Be Free,” “My Back Pages,” “I Don’t Believe You,” and “It Ain’t Me, Babe,” all on the latter album. No matter, whether seen as a “protest singer” (a term Dylan had always disavowed) or as

¹⁷ Spitz, 217.

¹⁸ The album has recently been honored as one of the first fifty recordings included in the Library of Congress’s National Recording Registry—it is number 45 on the list, joining Bing Crosby’s recording of Irving Berlin’s “White Christmas” (#33), Woody Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land” (#34), Elvis Presley’s Sun Records sessions (#39) and Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech (#44). *Los Angeles Times* (January 28, 2003), A14.

a folk-rock artist, Dylan's star continued to rise meteorically. Just after the release of "The Times They Are A-Changin'," he was reported to say: "I am now famous by the rules of public famiosity."¹⁹ On February 25, he appeared on the Steve Allen show, and was poised for the sustained public exposure that a national television appearance would bring.

With three more classic albums in 1965-66, more celebrated concert performances, and a documentary film of his tour of England, he reached the pinnacle of fame. Backed by fellow rock n' roll musicians Al Kooper, Mike Bloomfield, and Robbie Robertson, Dylan broke new ground by switching from acoustic folk to electrified rock and consequently exerted "a tremendous influence on the shaping of popular music. [His new style] inspired every rock 'n' roller for the next twenty years."²⁰ With the albums "Bringing It All Back Home," "Highway 61 Revisited," and "Blonde on Blonde," Bob Dylan was at the height of his career and his creativity. The latter double album, released in June of 1966, was said to "confirm[s] Dylan's stature as the greatest American rock presence since Elvis Presley."²¹ But by then he had attained something even greater than the musical celebrity of Presley—Dylan had become, to invoke the cliché, 'the voice of a generation.' Todd Gitlin, first-hand observer and historian of sixties radicalism, testifies to this, recalling that "Dylan *sang for us*."²² But more than the man's music, it was the man himself. It is not too much of a stretch to assign to Bob Dylan—that is, to his persona—principal credit for ushering in the cultural revolution called the "Sixties."

Dylan's Jewish associations

¹⁹ Broadside

²⁰ Spitz, 273.

²¹ Tim Riley, *Hard Rain* (1992), 128. Parenthetically, it was in 1966 that Elvis Presley first recorded a Dylan song ("Tomorrow Is a Long Time").

²² Gitlin, 197.

The biographical literature on Bob Dylan is voluminous. Following the seminal biography by Anthony Scaduto published in 1973,²³ major biographies include Robert Shelton's *No Direction Home* in 1986,²⁴ Bob Spitz's *Dylan: A Biography* in 1989,²⁵ Clinton Heylin's *Bob Dylan: Behind the Shades* in 1991 (and *Behind the Shades Revisited* in 2001),²⁶ and Howard Sounes' *Down the Highway* in 2001.²⁷ All these biographical treatments, as well as dozens of anthologies and related studies on Dylan, view him as being of Jewish origin. In stark contrast to Dylan's own memoir (discussed below), his numerous biographers give ample weight to his Jewish upbringing, personal connections, and religious experience. After duly reporting his birth in 1941, the biographies all cover his Jewish antecedents and family history. Dylan, they each point out in turn, was born Robert Allen Zimmerman and grew up in Hibbing, Minnesota. To the coastal, urban, indeed Jewish ear, such middle-American origins sound like the middle of nowhere—certainly young Zimmerman felt likewise and escaped as soon as he was able. But contrary to the image of geographic isolation and cultural desolation—and contrary to the myth he would later cultivate—his early upbringing and formative milieu were surprisingly Jewish. As a youth, Robert was close to his maternal great-grandfather, Benjamin H. Edelstein, a Yiddish-speaking, Orthodox Jewish immigrant from Lithuania who settled in the Iron Range boomtown of Hibbing early in the century. The Zimmerman family had settled in the somewhat larger Jewish community of nearby Duluth. It was there that Robert's parents, Abe and Beatty, met at an AZA (American Zionist Association) mixer. Beatty later served as president of the local Hadassah as well as of her synagogue sisterhood, and sent her son to Camp Herzl in the summers. The Zimmermans were the stereotypical Jewish couple of their generation, a stolid businessman and a socially ambitious wife, together spoiling their children with everything they desired.

The biographers also take note of the various Jewish associations he maintained in Minneapolis and New York City. In fact, for someone so intent on escaping his origins,

²³ Anthony Scaduto, *Bob Dylan* (NY: Signet, 1973).

²⁴ Robert Shelton, *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan* (NY: Da Capo Press, 1997).

²⁵ Bob Spitz, *Dylan: A Biography* (NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 1989).

²⁶ Clinton Heylin, *Bob Dylan: Behind the Shades Revisited* (NY: HarperCollins, 1991, 2001).

²⁷ Howard Sounes, *Down the Highway: The Life of Bob Dylan* (NY: Grove Press, 2001).

Bob Dylan still tended to gravitate to other Jews. His girlfriend during his Minneapolis period (at the very moment of escape) was Judy Rubin, whom he knew from their Camp Herzl days, and his two best friends there were Gretel Hoffman and David Whitaker, all Jewish. Though Whitaker was an early intellectual influence, there is no doubt that his chief influence, his “spiritual father” as it were, was Woody Guthrie (not Jewish, though married to a Jewish woman). Still, there would soon arise two other father figures in his life—two Jewish gurus who each played key roles in the development of the Dylan myth: Allen Ginsberg, the beat poet who showed him the manipulations of word, and Albert Grossman, the business manager who showed him the manipulations of image. Dylan himself became some freakish cross between the mystic Ginsberg and the materialist Grossman, capturing the liberating qualities of the one as well as the beat-the-system cleverness of the other, conflating the Jewish genius of both. Moreover, when he made his celebrated switch from acoustic folk music to electrified rock ‘n roll, prominent among the backup musicians he chose were fellow Jews Al Kooper, Mike Bloomfield, Barry Goldberg, Harvey Goldstein and Robbie Robertson. Other friends during those early days included Nat Hentoff, Barry Kornfeld, Paul Rothchild, Al Aronowitz and David Cohen. And last but not least, his first wife and mother of his children was former model Sara Lownds—born Shirley Noznisky. Like both his father Abe Zimmerman *and* his idol Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan married a nice Jewish girl. As much as he may have wanted to leave the fold, it seems he was just more comfortable with members of his own tribe.

There was one other glitch in his would-be assimilation—it is hard to deny that Bob Dylan, especially the young Dylan, *looked* Jewish. Curly hair, olive complexion, hooded eyes, that classically contoured nose—one need only look at photographs from this early period of his career to see the absurdity of the attempt to hide his Jewish roots, so stereotypically Ashkenazically “Jewish-y” did he look. When the nineteen-year-old Dylan showed up at the door of Woody Guthrie’s house shortly after his arrival in New York City, he was greeted at the door by Guthrie’s daughter Nora. The scene is recounted by Dylan biographer Howard Sounes:

She immediately recognized the look of the boy at the door. Although Woody Guthrie was descended from Midwestern Anglo stock going back generations, his second wife's family was Russian-Jewish, from Odessa. The boy at the door had the same dark curly hair Nora and her brothers [Arlo and Joady] had and his face reminded her of the Jewish boys she knew in and around New York.²⁸

No wonder then that Dylan's new Greenwich Village friends—fellow folkies like Dave Van Ronk and Ramblin' Jack Elliot—would good-naturedly humor him when he spun his yarns about being descended from Native Americans or having been an orphan from New Mexico. They all intuited Dylan's "secret identity" and accepted the ruse. As Van Ronk remarked, "Nobody held it against him. Reinventing yourself has always been part of show business."²⁹ Indeed, Dylan was not the only one on MacDougal Street to have remade himself. Ramblin' Jack, the premier Woody Guthrie imitator and another key influence on the young Dylan, was born Elliot Adnopoz, the son of a Jewish doctor in Brooklyn, New York. When Dylan first heard the truth about his mentor's background, sitting in the Café Figaro sometime about March of 1961, he is said to have doubled over in laughter—here was someone who had done a better job of obscuring his origins than even he. Van Ronk later recalled: "We had all suspected Bobby was Jewish, and that proved it."³⁰ In a much later retelling of the incident, he adds yet another salient detail:

Bobby nearly fell off his chair laughing. It seemed to strike him much funnier than it did us, because we always assumed that Jack had been a cowboy. Then, two years before *Newsweek* revealed Bob's own background, I knew that Bobby too was an actor. He never said anything, he just laughed till I thought he would burst.³¹

As Bob Dylan made his rapid ascent to celebrity, from 1961-63, his Jewish identity remained a secret, even to some of his closest friends. Certainly the general public did

²⁸ Howard Sounes, *Down the Highway*, 76.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 85.

³⁰ Dave Van Ronk quoted by Scaduto, 67; and requoted in Billig, 124.

³¹ Shelton, *No Direction Home*, 104.

not know at first that he was a Jew—and why would they? Hearing his music on the radio rather than seeing him up close in a club, they might just as easily assume he was black. On the other hand, one look at the cover photograph of any of his early albums would have provided a clue—all of which raises an intriguing question: when did the public catch on? At what point did the Jewishness of Bob Dylan become part of his persona? In fact, as Van Ronk indicated, there was a specific point at which his identity was publicly revealed. Dylan was “outed” as a Jew named Zimmerman by a *Newsweek* magazine article in November of 1963. It is worth remembering, however, that prior to that date he had spent nearly two years “in the closet,” so to speak.

As further detailed below, the young Dylan meticulously avoided all explicit references to Jewishness—with a few curious exceptions. Like Mel Brooks’ Yiddish-speaking Indian chief in the 1974 film “Blazing Saddles,” Dylan signaled both his true roots and his remove from them when he slipped into his comic relief number, “Talkin’ Hava Nagilah Blues,” a staple of his early coffeehouse performances.³² In his *New York Times* review, Robert Shelton interprets “Talking Havah Nagilah” as “burlesque[ing] the folk-music craze and *the singer himself*” [emphasis mine]. Nevertheless, he concludes by honoring his subject’s obfuscations and protecting his true identity: “Mr. Dylan is vague about his antecedents and birthplace, but it matters less where he has been than where he is going, and that would seem to be straight up.”³³ Though he doesn’t confess to it in his 1986 biography, Shelton probably suspected Dylan’s Jewish background but nonetheless chose to respect his subject’s privacy. His probable inside knowledge is suggested by the “singer himself” comment, but even more compellingly by the fact that Shelton’s own real name was Shapiro.

Introducing the “Havah Nagilah” send-up with the sly, “Here’s a foreign song I learned in Utah,” Dylan would launch into a ridiculously distorted and truncated version of the familiar Hebrew refrain. Critics have tended to overlook the Jewish significance of this, e.g.: “Dylan’s flare for the comic is usually put to use in the talking blues form. . .

³² A version of the song, recorded on 4/25/62, is included on the 1991 release “Bob Dylan: the bootleg series, volume 1” (Columbia Records).

³³ Shelton, *No Direction Home*, 111.

“Talkin’ Havah Nagilah” was made up especially for members of the audience that shout out requests for songs way out of his line.”³⁴ Yet they were probably the first Hebrew words that had passed his lips since his bar mitzvah, just seven years before. More to the point, Israeli folk songs like “Hava Nagilah” were a staple of 1950s folk music, led by the Weavers (“Tzena, Tzena”), Theodore Bikel, and Harry Belafonte. It was Belafonte who popularized “Hava Nagila” [and from whose 1959 Carnegie Hall concert recording this author first learned the words to the song—so perfectly did he enunciate the Hebrew], and who had been an early influence on the young Dylan—who was no doubt titillated to play harmonica on the established star’s latest album in June of 1961. By lampooning the song, Dylan was not only poking fun at his own bar mitzvah background, but also the commercial folk revival and the pretensions of a black Calypso singer peddling Jewish music to the masses. In his mind, they were surely related.

We must pause at this point in the Dylan saga to add some context. For it was during that very period, 1962-63, that another “folksinger” took the country by storm—and in stark contrast to Bob Dylan, did so in an unabashedly Jewish vein. This was none other than Allan Sherman, a bespectacled, rotund television writer who in his spare time entertained friends with song parodies—so entertainingly in fact that in the summer of 1962 he was persuaded to record an album. The live recording was entitled, in good Jewish humor, “My Son, the Folk Singer” (a takeoff of the Jewish mother’s favorite claim: “my son, the doctor”). Released in October 1962, it included such clever send-ups as “The Ballad of Harry Lewis” (to the tune of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”), “Sarah Jackman” (to “Frere Jacques”), and “Seltzer Boy” (“Water Boy”), all telling tales of contemporary Jewish life in America and/or having lyrics drenched with Jewish references. In “Shake Hands With Your Uncle Max,” Sherman lists all the Jewish-sounding names in his old Brooklyn neighborhood; in “Sir Greenbaum’s Madrigal,” his not-so-chivalrous knight laments, “that’s no job for a boy who is Jewish”; and in a wicked parody of Harry Belafonte’s “Matilda” called “My Zelda,” he sings: “oh, why did she go and fall in love, I haven’t seen her since Tisha B’ov.”

³⁴ Gil Turner, “Bob Dylan—A New Voice Singing New Songs,” *Sing Out!*, October-November, 1962; reprinted in McGregor, 27.

Despite its patent ethnicity, “My Son, the Folk Singer” was an overnight sensation, selling 65,000 copies the first week, a half million in the first month, and becoming “the fastest-selling record album in history.”³⁵ It would eventually go gold (over one million sold), turning Allan Sherman into a household name. In dazed wonderment, Sherman relates in his autobiography how “my son, the [blank]” became a catchphrase across the country, how President Kennedy was overheard singing “Sarah Jackman” (later telling Sherman in person, “I’ve got your record and I like it very much.”), and how a Harvard graduate student’s thesis explaining the record’s success was that “all over America people were expressing their secret wish to be Jewish.”³⁶ The album was such a commercial success that Sherman released another record just two months later, now appropriately titled “My Son, the Celebrity.” It included more parodies such as “Al ‘n Yetta” (to “Alouette”), “Won’t You Come Home, Disraeli” (“Won’t You Come Home, Bill Bailey”), and another Belafonte take-off, “Harvey ‘n Sheila”—like his contemporary, Bob Dylan, Allan Sherman had also chosen to spoof “Hava Nagila.” In fact, Sherman’s recording, in November of 1962, followed by several months Dylan’s recording of “Talkin’ Hava Nagila Blues,” recorded during the “Freewheelin’” sessions in March 1962. When “Blowin’ in the Wind” became a hit the following summer, one of its chief rivals for radio airplay was Sherman’s new smash hit, “Hello Muddah, Hello Fadduh.” Obviously, we are talking about two very different types of music and two different cultural arenas. The parallel is only worth making due to the disparity between Allan Sherman’s popularly accepted Jewishness and Bob Dylan’s persistent reluctance to identify. How ironic that at the very moment that Jewish became “in” in America, the soon-to-be most famous Jew in America was still trying desperately to “pass.”

In this context we see the *Newsweek* magazine article in a different light. As Dylan’s star began to rise through 1963, curiosity regarding his background began to grow as well. In advance of his breakout Carnegie Hall concert, reporters from *Newsweek* contacted his managers to arrange an in-depth interview—the resulting story, written by Dick Schaap

³⁵ Allan Sherman, *A Gift of Laughter* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Crest, 1965), 21.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 221, 243.

(who later became well known as a sports reporter) and published on November 4, 1963, turned out to be a journalistic “hatchet job” that became an embarrassment for *Newsweek*, and worse, a disaster for Dylan, who would never again trust the press and virtually stopped giving straight interviews thereafter. The article, entitled “I Am My Words,” called his very identity into question. Adding insult to injury, its accompanying photo was captioned, “Bob Dylan: What’s in a name?” It further castigated him for his “hip talk, punctuated with obscenities,” and continued: “His singing voice scratches and shouts so jarringly that his success, at first, seems incredible . . . [yet] his knack for stirring audiences is unmistakable.” In fact, the reporter admitted, “Dylan is practically a religion.”³⁷ Despite such grudging acknowledgment of his success, the thrust of the article was its direct challenge to Bob Dylan’s veracity and its sensationalized exposure of his great ‘secret’:

. . . his audiences share his pain, and seem jealous because they grew up in conventional homes and . . . schools. The ironic thing is that Bob Dylan, too, grew up in a conventional home, and went to conventional schools. He shrouds his past in contradictions, but he is the elder son of a Hibbing, Minn., appliance dealer named Abe Zimmerman. . . . Dylan admits he was born in Duluth and raised in Hibbing, but . . . he denied that Bob Dylan was ever Bobby Zimmerman. “Dig my draft card, man,” he said. “Bob Dylan.” (He changed his name legally on August 9, 1962.) His parents? “I don’t know my parents,” he said. “They don’t know me. I’ve lost contact with them for years.”³⁸

He was lying. At the very moment Dylan spoke those words, the *Newsweek* article revealed, his parents were ensconced in a New York City hotel awaiting the Carnegie Hall concert their son was about to give and had flown them out to see. Professing puzzlement as to his motives for obfuscating, the reporter further wrote: “Why Dylan . . . should bother to deny his past is a mystery. Perhaps he feels it would spoil the image he works so hard to cultivate. . . . Dylan says he is writing a book that will explain

³⁷ Shelton, *No Direction Home*, 193.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 193-4.

everything. But, he insists, the explanations are irrelevant. “I am my words,” he says. . . .” After the article came out, he continued to insist: “I just want to be known for what I do.”³⁹ But of course the press was of another opinion, refusing to accept that an artist can be defined by his/her art alone, but insisting instead that the facts of one’s life matter; in the case of Bob Dylan, the truth behind the image was that of a middle-class Jewish boy made good. In no uncertain terms, the article called him on his deception, and, somewhat more subtly, criticized him for his assimilation. In any event, the cat was now out of the bag.

Dylan’s reaction to the article was unmitigated fury,⁴⁰ his ire directed toward *Newsweek*, its reporters, the press in general, his managers, Albert Grossman, and probably most sharply, toward his family for allegedly spilling the beans. Though it’s not documented, his biographers have theorized that “his anger must have been fierce because his family rarely spoke to reporters after this.”⁴¹ Of course, the press soon had another preoccupation, as John F. Kennedy was assassinated three weeks later on November 22. Bob Dylan’s Oedipal anger toward his parents and the establishment then emerged in a rather ugly way as he infamously announced that he “saw some of myself” in Lee Harvey Oswald. The occasion for the provocative statement was a fundraising dinner (held on December 13) for the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee, an Old Left organization. In accepting their Tom Paine award, Dylan took the opportunity to lambaste them for their supposed infirmity and irrelevance, and then went the extra yard of unnerving them with his claim of sympathy for the president’s murderer. The audience’s response is reported as deep insult and offense⁴²—we can only speculate what part of that was their disappointment in this young Jew, as recently revealed. From our historical perspective, the incident must be seen as a key moment in the disassociation of the New Left from its predecessor movement, and of the break of the new generation from the old. For Dylan,

³⁹ Ibid., 195.

⁴⁰ Spitz, 238: “When Bob saw the story, he flew into a rage. He had been unmasked as a fraud. His dirty little secret was finally out in the open. What a blow to his image! . . . Meanwhile, he banned friends, family, and even business associates from consorting with the press.”

⁴¹ Sounes, *Down the Highway*, 143: “Bob virtually screamed with anger when he saw the article, claiming that Grossman should never have authorized the interview and that family should not talk to journalists.”

⁴² Spitz, 239-43.

it marked the beginning of his ‘angry young man’ phase, coincident with both his publicly unmasked Jewish identity and his continued skyrocketing to fame.

Success breeds imitation, and Dylan’s influence on the careers of other songwriters and performing artists would soon be apparent. In March of 1964, the young singing duo of Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel recorded their first album, “Wednesday Morning, 3 A.M.” which included their hit tune, “The Sound of Silence,” as well as a protest song in the civil rights vein, “He Was My Brother” (specifically about the death of civil rights martyr Andrew Goodman, Simon’s classmate), and a cover version of “The Times They Are A-Changin’.” Paul Simon the songwriter was clearly influenced by Bob Dylan. As Robert Shelton tells it, “Dylan’s mystique haunted Simon,” and “until Simon no longer needed to emulate anyone, he was probably Dylan’s most skillful imitator.”⁴³ In one significant way, however, Simon did not imitate Dylan. According to Michael Billig, author of *Rock ‘n’ roll Jews*:

With the recording complete, Simon and Garfunkel still wanted to choose a name under which they could release the album. They wanted names that would not sound too Jewish, fearing lest the sales be affected by anti-Semitism. Apparently, Wilson [Tom Wilson, the Columbia producer—who was black] was outraged. He criticized the pair for singing about racist prejudice but being unwilling to stand up and be counted when it mattered. He insisted that they record under their own names. And so they did.⁴⁴

And thus did “blacks help[ed] Jews come to terms with their own identity.” Billig adds that Simon later seemed to forget his original desire to pass, and disingenuously told an interviewer in 1967 that the choice of “Simon & Garfunkel” was “honest”—in contrast to another famous Jewish contemporary—as Simon continued: “I always thought it was a big shock when Bob Dylan turned out to be Bob Zimmerman”; and offered the advice

⁴³ Shelton, 252.

⁴⁴ Billig, 134.

that “every time you drop a defense, you feel so much lighter.”⁴⁵ So despite his initial assimilatory impulse in 1964, he had changed his tune by the time of the interview, three years later. Indeed, the times were changing in regard to public Jewish identification. While Tom Wilson deserves all due credit for his intervention, the broader influence of Bob Dylan and then Paul Simon should be cited as well. Mike Nichols (nee Peschowsky), director of the 1967 landmark film “The Graduate” (soundtrack by Simon & Garfunkel), would later remark that Art Garfunkel was the first pop star he recalled having an ethnically identifiable last name [which remark, made in a TV documentary about Paul Simon, led me to wonder what difference it would have made had Garfunkel’s name been Garfinkel instead—??]. In the ensuing years, an impressive number of new Jewish singer-songwriters would appear, all in some measure influenced by Bob Dylan—as Paul Simon noted, Dylan “made it possible for a whole group of lyricists to come onto the scene.”⁴⁶ Yet none of them felt it necessary to alter their Jewish names—those who emerged in the mid-sixties include: David Bromberg, Leonard Cohen, Neil Diamond, Tom Lehrer, Phil Ochs, and Zal Yanofsky (of “The Loving Spoonful”); and a bit later, in the seventies: Steve Goodman, Billy Joel, Barry Manilow, Randy Newman, Jonathan Richman, and Lou Reed (whose father had already changed the family name from Rabinowitz—admittedly, it is hard to imagine “Lou Rabinowitz” founding the Velvet Underground and penning “Walk on the Wild Side”).

Dylan’s Jewish Denial

So far, I have been writing of Bob Dylan as a representative case of an assimilated Jew. But from another point of view, Dylan simply epitomizes the post-modern notion of a quixotic, ever-changeable, non-essentialized identity. This is a particularly American historical perspective, as Dylan’s iconoclastic construction of self took place against the background of the 1960s counterculture and is usually understood to embody its spirit of personal rebellion. For instance, one Dylan biographer opens his narrative thus:

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 131-2.

“[This] book is not about one man, but many—the Bob Dylan who wrote brilliant songs and revolutionized our culture by making it conform to his abstract imagination; and the panoply of alter egos he created in order to become that pop phenomenon. In the process, Dylan constructed a persona based on paradox and mystery, illusion and misdirection, fantasy and exaggeration. The invention of “Bob Dylan” is his essence . . .”⁴⁷

Cultural historian Stephen Whitfield concurs, matching Dylan up with *The Great Gatsby* and other self-made American icons: “Today Jay Gatsby’s mythic equivalent may be, like his creator [F. Scott Fitzgerald], a Minnesotan, Bob Dylan (born Robert Zimmerman), whose identity has been even more protean—folk song populist, remotest of rock stars, phantom of the Opry, anything.”⁴⁸ And more recently, Whitfield comments on Dylan’s famous name change: “To bestow a new patronymic is to test the possibilities of self-invention. . . The onomastic switch made a point: he affirmed his own right to be anyone from anywhere, emerging from a hazy and partly fabricated past to wriggle out of any fixed identity. . . In shuffling card of identity so often, Dylan developed the most unstable persona in rock history.”⁴⁹

Dylan’s seminal role in the creation of the 60s counterculture flowed directly from what had become the essence of his public image: personal liberation—a total, uncompromising liberation from one’s own past and from the norms of conventional society. Just as he had escaped his own background, he also parted ways with the media, the liberal establishment, and even his own folk music community. In case anyone missed the point, he proclaimed his independence quite explicitly and defiantly with memorable lyrics such as: “I ain’t gonna work on Maggie’s Farm no more,” and “It’s all over now, Baby Blue” (both from 1965’s “Bringing It All Back Home”). But Dylan was now writing from a purely personal perspective, his liberation thus taking place on an interior landscape. Both in his life and in his music, therefore, Bob Dylan represented the

⁴⁷ Spitz, *Dylan: A Biography*, xi.

⁴⁸ Stephen Whitfield, *Voices of Jacob, Hands of Esau* (NY: Archon Books, 1984), 67-68.

⁴⁹ Stephen Whitfield, *In Search of American Jewish Culture* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1999), 113.

ultimate rebellion—breaking free of one’s own limitations, breaking free of oneself. Listen to Todd Gitlin’s description of the “romantic vision” of the song “Mr. Tambourine Man”:

Thus did Dylan lilt of absolute liberty in an infinite present time severed from the past: this was the transcendentalist fantasy of the wholly, abstractly free individual, finally released from the pains and distortions of society’s traps, liberated to the embrace of nature and the wonder of essential things, in an America capable of starting the world again.⁵⁰

In the view of many, Bob Dylan was the spirit of the sixties, providing its emergent youth culture with much of its independent attitude and rebellious posturing. At the same time of course, Dylan was a recalcitrant young Jew, providing a new generation of American Jews with a model of personal autonomy, insisting there was no ‘right’ way to be Jewish. As Whitfield writes: “Adjusting his yarmulke at the Western Wall one year, then claiming to have found Jesus, Dylan never has broken stride, for he seems to know instinctively that here it is possible to be a white Negro, a non-Jewish Jew, a Jew for Jesus, even an observant Jew.”⁵¹ And further adds: “He inevitably flummoxed the essentialism long entwined in Jewish identity. Showing up at the Western Wall in 1971, celebrating his son Jesse’s bar mitzvah in Jerusalem twelve years later, vaguely affiliating for a while with the Lubavitcher Hasidim, Dylan has professed religious beliefs.”⁵² From this perspective, Dylan’s negotiations with his own Jewishness are as relevant as his general freedom of self-expression. For in crafting a universalist Americanized persona, Bob Dylan was acting as a modern assimilated Jew, in flight from his own history. Such a rejection of Jewishness became a core element of his public image, and thus has Jewish historical import.

Acting consistently from the very beginning of his career to the present day, Bob Dylan has avoided any overt affirmation of his Jewish origins. Inventing himself as a musical

⁵⁰ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (NY: Bantam Books, 1987), 200-01.

⁵¹ Whitfield, *Voices of Jacob, Hands of Esau*, 68.

⁵² Whitfield, *In Search of American Jewish Culture*, 113.

performer in his early twenties, he self-consciously assumed a fabricated identity. Even after publicly exposed (in November of 1963), he continued to deny the fact of his Jewish background. Later, at mid-career, he undertook the most extreme form of Jewish denial by converting to Christianity—a short-lived but widely-noted ‘apostasy.’ Now in his sixties, Dylan has begun to shape his own biographical narrative through a published memoir (2004) and a film documentary (2005)—but nowhere do we find any examination of his Jewish roots and influences—in fact, he barely mentions the subject. Always keenly engaged in the construction of his own public persona, he clearly has no interest in adding the dimension of Jewishness to his image. This basic attribute, his commitment to complete assimilation, *or at least the appearance of* assimilation, is a defining feature of the famous person we know as Bob Dylan.

As described earlier, Robert Zimmerman’s parents were the stereotypical Jewish couple of their generation. Later, Bob Dylan would recall his upbringing with all the venom of the stereotypical Jewish son: “I kept running because I wasn’t free, I was constantly on guard. Somehow, way back then, I already knew that parents do what they do because they’re up tight. They’re concerned with their kids in relation to *themselves*. I mean, they want their kids to please them, not to embarrass them—so they can be proud of them. They want you to be what *they* want you to be. So I starting running...”⁵³

Attempting to obliterate the memory of all this middle-class Jewish normalcy, Bob Dylan became meticulously obscure about his origins, concocting one tall tale after another to deflect attention from the truth. It cannot be emphasized enough the degree to which Bob Dylan attempted to deracinate himself as he became famous. He became a pathological liar about his background, even lying to his first great love, Suze Rotolo, who recalled: “When I first met him, he told me incredible tales—about being an orphan and that he had run away from his foster parents in Fargo, North Dakota.”⁵⁴ Of course, the key to this Houdini-like escape trick was the name change. Echo Helstrom, Bobby Zimmerman’s teenage girlfriend in Hibbing, later recalled: “I casually said to Bob, ‘Gee,

⁵³ Quoted in Nat Hentoff, “The Crackin’, Shakin’, Breakin’ Sounds,” *The New Yorker Magazine*, October 24, 1964; reprinted in McGregor, 57-58.

⁵⁴ Spitz, 153.

Zimmerman, that’s a funny name. Is it Jewish?’ Well, Bob didn’t answer anything at *all*, he just looked straight ahead with his face sort of funny. Later in the week John took me aside at school and said, ‘Listen, Echo, don’t ever ask Bob about being Jewish again. He doesn’t like to talk about it.’⁵⁵ And so, the seventeen-year-old known around town as “Jimmy” began to seek a pseudonym and soon settled on “Dylan,” partly inspired by the poet Dylan Thomas and perhaps also by the television character Marshall Dillon.⁵⁶

Dylan’s change of name should not be seen simply as a convention of show business, as for example when aspiring actor Emanuel Goldenberg chose the stage name Edward Robinson—but “to remember who he really was,”⁵⁷ the newly christened Robinson added the middle initial “G.” Bob Dylan on the other hand took what amounted to an ontological leap, a self-transforming act of complete redefinition. As one of his many biographers, Bob Spitz, observes: “The name Dylan signified a formal, if not final, rejection of Bobby’s roots. . . . Certainly no one would suspect him of being a Jew.”⁵⁸ For a brief time he lived a double life. By day, as a freshman at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, he lived at the Jewish fraternity and attended Hillel House functions as Robert Zimmerman; but at night, in the bohemian district of Dinkytown, he turned into Bob Dylan. But this Jekyll and Hyde existence was temporary—Bob Dylan would soon take over entirely. Already in high school in Hibbing, he had transformed himself from a middle-class Jewish kid into an aspiring rock ‘n roller; now, over the course of his first year away from home, he transformed himself yet again, from a suburban punk into an urban intellectual, substituting folk music for rock, and finalizing the transition from Zimmerman to Dylan. There would be no going back—he became a man possessed, possessed with his own new self.

When Bob Dylan arrived in New York City in January of 1961—the same month as JFK’s inauguration—there were two distinct music scenes in place. One was centered in the legendary Brill Building of “Tin Pan Alley” fame, the songwriting factory originally

⁵⁵ Quoted in Toby Thompson, *Positively Main Street*, and reprinted in McGregor, *ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁶ For more on the origins of the name, see Dylan’s recent account in *Chronicles, vol. I* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 78-79.

⁵⁷ Quoted in film documentary, “Hollywoodism: Jews, Movies, and the American Dream” (19).

⁵⁸ Spitz, 69.

associated with Berlin and his generation. In the early 60s, yet another generation of Jewish composers were ensconced there, churning out the hits of post-Elvis, pre-Beatles rock ‘n roll—Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller, Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman, Gerry Goffin and Carole King, Phil Spector, Neil Sedaka, et al. A stellar list of names, yet Bob Dylan rejected this form of popular music as formulaic and commercial—we might surmise that it seemed “too Jewish” to him as well. As in Dinkytown, he chose instead to associate himself with the downtown scene of Greenwich Village and its music of choice—folk. It was as a guitar- and harmonica-playing *folksinger*—not yet a rock ‘n roll artist nor a writer of songs—that Bob Dylan first made his mark. The new persona he affected was that of a rural knockabout, re-creating himself as a cross between the (black) Delta blues-player and (white) country crooner. It was the perfect false identity with which to eradicate all traces of his true background. In his rise to fame, Bob Dylan presented himself as the man with no past, a Woody Guthrie-like wanderer without roots, without a home. He disassociated himself as best he could from his hometown, his parents, his origins.

In rejecting his own past, he came to embody the future, and in the process played a central role in inspiring the new “counterculture” of 1960s America. Yet apparently, such an extreme individualist attitude of self-invention would not sustain him spiritually, for by the end of the 1970s he had become involved with a Christian community called the Vineyard Fellowship, and soon became a ‘born again’ Christian. During this phase of his career, he recorded three albums of unabashedly Christian music: “Slow Train Coming” (1979), “Saved” (1980), and “Shot of Love” (1981). The music was generally acknowledged to be of high quality, the song “Gotta Serve Somebody” from the 1979 album winning him his first Grammy award. The reaction of many fans, especially Jewish fans, was less than sanguine. Their general response of disbelief and disillusionment will be explored further below, but it is worth noting that by all accounts, Dylan himself never felt any sense of transgression—spending three years as essentially an evangelical preacher was simply “part of [his varied] experience.”⁵⁹ Though there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of Dylan’s conversion, one has to wonder what

⁵⁹ Quoted in Shelton, *No Direction Home*, 488.

subconscious role might have been played by his own religious background—if becoming ‘born again’ is not the ultimate gesture of rebellion of a Jewish boy, what is?

Dylan’s resistance to being seen as a Jew has become even more evident in recent years. In his 2004 memoir, *Chronicles: Volume One*, he writes eloquently of his youth in Minnesota, his family, friends, and early days in New York City—but nary a word about the Jewish experience inherent in all the above. Though by no means intended as a comprehensive autobiography, the near-total absence of Jewish references still jumps out (at least to the Jewishly attuned reader) and begs for explanation. One of the pleasures of the book is Dylan’s gusto for recalling and depicting the various characters he met in the early days of his career. He also loves to relate arcana of American history. Thus, when introducing noteworthy figures in his life such as John Hammond, Pete Seeger, Ray Gooch, Paul Clayton, Woody Guthrie and Dave Van Ronk, he is quick to point out their purebred American heritage, e.g.: “[Hammond] was legendary, pure American aristocracy.” “Pete’s ancestors had come over on the *Mayflower*, . . . his relatives had fought the Battle of Bunker Hill, for Christ’s sake.” “Ray . . . came from a long line of ancestry made up of bishops, generals, even a colonial governor.” “Clayton . . . was from New Bedford, Mass., the whaling town—he sang a lot of sea shanties, had a Puritan ancestry, but some of his relatives had been from the early Virginia families.”⁶⁰ Yet when describing other important contacts in the New York folk music scene such as Lou Levy, Izzy Young, Moe Asch, Irwin Silber, Harold Leventhal, Albert Grossman and Clive Davis, not a word is uttered about their historical backgrounds and ethnic origins (all Jewish). The effect of this silence is a kind of studied disinterest in the Jewish past, and, when combined with his apparent adulation of Americana, reveals a clear bias for one over the other.

Jewish subject matter intrudes from time to time, but Dylan shows little interest in exploring it in any personalized way. At one juncture he relates the story of sitting in Johnny Cash’s living room with a group of other musicians, when the country music great Joe Carter asked him out of the blue, “You don’t eat pork, do you?” His only

⁶⁰ *Chronicles*, 5, 6, 26, 73.

response was “Uh, no sir, I don’t” and a cryptic reference to Malcolm X.⁶¹ He notes that Cash and Kris Kristofferson were taken aback, but offers no further explanation or reaction to the implied antisemitism of Carter’s comment. Similarly, in reminiscing about the early Greenwich Village days, he recalls once being asked: “You ever heard of Auschwitz?” Dylan’s reply: “Sure I had, who hadn’t?”⁶² The comment is followed by a descriptive paragraph on the Holocaust, but no sense of personal connection intrudes.

Throughout his narrative, Dylan is simply allergic to the words “Jew” or “Jewish.” A third of the way through the book he offers a nicely descriptive portrait of his Jewish grandmother, but in completely de-Judaized terms: “My grandmother had only one leg and had been a seamstress. . . She was a dark lady, smoked a pipe. . . My grandmother’s voice possessed a haunting accent—face always set in a half-despairing expression. . . She’d come to America from Odessa, a seaport town in southern Russia. . . Originally, she’d come from Turkey, . . Her family was from Kagizman, a town in Turkey near the Armenian border, and the family name had been Kirghiz. . . My grandmother’s ancestors had been from Constantinople.”⁶³ All this is fine, but he is describing his paternal grandmother Anna Zimmerman, a Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrant. Another memoirist might have evinced some interest in his Hebraic origins, and may very well have mused over his apparent Sephardic roots. But Dylan prefers to imagine his antecedents as not Jewish at all—he concludes: “As a teenager, I used to sing the Ritchie Valens song “In a Turkish Town” . . . and it seemed to suit me.”⁶⁴

Most blatant of all such aversions, he disavows his own family name of Zimmerman and all it implied, and even the very existence of his former self. In discussing the sources of the invented name ‘Bob Dylan,’ he writes: “What I was going to do as soon as I left home was just call myself Robert Allen. As far as I was concerned, that was who I was—that’s what my parents named me. . . There was little of my identity that wasn’t in

⁶¹ Ibid., 102.

⁶² Ibid., 27.

⁶³ Ibid., 92-93.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

it.”⁶⁵ And then goes even further: “As far as Bobby Zimmerman goes, I’m going to give it to you right straight and you can check it out. One of the early presidents of the San Bernardino Angels was Bobby Zimmerman, and he was killed in 1964 . . . That person is gone. That was the end of him.”⁶⁶

A similar study could be made of Martin Scorsese’s 2005 documentary on the early years of Dylan’s career, *No Direction Home*, whose centerpiece is an extensive interview with the famously taciturn singer. Again, the subject of Dylan’s Jewishness is all but ignored, and seemingly, studiously avoided. One might object that that is the man’s right—first, to define himself as he pleases, and second, to relate his story according to his own self-definition. Yet the willful Jewish avoidance of Bob Dylan’s self-narrative becomes painfully evident when measured against the enormous significance he attained among Jews, as a “Jewish poet,” “Jewish singer,” and even “Jewish prophet.”

Jewhooing Dylan

If Dylan as a pop cultural symbol and musical influence played such an important role in the revolutionary trends of the day, then how and in what measure did his Jewishness add to the message? As we have seen, his Jewish identity was revealed at the very moment he reached the peak of his fame and influence—surely, the public perception of Bob Dylan now included this not inconsequential fact—so it is legitimate to ask, what role did it play? More specifically, we might pose two related sets of questions: 1) What did Dylan’s Jewish identity mean to the general public, and how might his Jewishness have been emblematic of the revolutionary counterculture?; and 2) What did his countercultural persona mean to Jews, and how did it contribute to the evolution of American Jewish identity?

The answer to such questions may be found in a review of the response to Dylan that speaks directly to the theme of his Jewishness—i.e., the “Jewhooing” of Bob Dylan.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 78.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 79.

One of the basic signs of “Dylan Jewhooring” is, not surprisingly, reference to his original name, Zimmerman. In 1970, the former Beatle John Lennon recorded a song entitled, “God,” in which he proclaimed the end of 60s idealism (“The Dream is Over”) and offered a litany of newly rejected beliefs—after a chorus denying the existence of God (“God is a Concept by which we measure our pain”), he sang:

I don't believe in Bible
 I don't believe in Tarot
 I don't believe in Hitler
 I don't believe in Jesus
 I don't believe in Kennedy
 I don't believe in Buddha
 I don't believe in Mantra
 I don't believe in Gita
 I don't believe in Yoga
 I don't believe in Kings
 I don't believe in Elvis
 I don't believe in Zimmerman⁶⁷

Bob Dylan had been an icon of the 60s counterculture ‘religion’ (as was John Lennon), and in debunking him along with other sacred cows, Lennon resorted to using his real name. This is an early example of the tendency to use “Zimmerman” when writing about Dylan—look, it points out, he’s not really who he claims to be. Dylan himself acknowledged this in a famed 1964 concert at New York’s Philharmonic Hall (recently issued as a CD). Following the moody “Gates of Eden” and while tuning up for the comic number, “If You Gotta Go, Go Now (Or Else You Got To Stay All Night),” he wryly comments (punctuated by laughter): “Don’t let that scare you . . . it’s just Halloween . . . I have my Bob Dylan mask on . . . I’m masquerading.”⁶⁸ But the

⁶⁷ John Lennon, “God,” from *Plastic Ono Band*, 1970.

⁶⁸ “Bob Dylan – Live 1964” (Columbia Records, 2004).

masquerade was over and Dylan's Jewishness was now an open secret and open to interpretation.

Some of the most fervent interpreters of Dylan's oeuvre were Jewish hippies, who began to treat his work midrashically in the countercultural 1960s. Beyond reading deeper meanings into every line of his songs, however, they saw the man himself as a religious symbol of transcendence and salvation. One of these hyped-up groupies, A. J. Weberman, coined the term that would apply to all such Dylan-obsessed fans: "Dylanologist."

Scaduto: "Weberman is the self-styled "Dylanologist" who has made a career of interpreting Dylans' lyrics and going through his garbage to learn all he can of the man he both idolizes and hates."⁶⁹

Shelton: "The Scavenger was a would-be anarchist star, a wheeler-dealer of the freaked-out New Left, a garbage groupie, a self-promoting, speedy-talking hustler named Alan Jules Weberman. He proclaimed himself "the world's greatest authority on Dylan," "the father of Dylanology." . . . One of the Scavenger's charges disturbed the most: "Dylan supports the racist and counterrevolutionary organization, the Jewish Defense League" . . ."⁷⁰

Sounes: "Born Alan Jules Weberman in Brooklyn in 1945, he became obsessed with Bob's music when he was at Michigan State University in the early sixties. Listening to the albums while stoned on marijuana or LSD he made what seemed to him a major discovery. "I realized it was poetry and required interpretation," he explains. "I developed the Dylanological Method, which is looking at each word in the context in which it appears and looking for words that have a similar theme that cluster around it

⁶⁹ Scaduto, 318.

⁷⁰ Shelton, 411-412.

(concordance). I started to devote a lot of time to just sitting around interpreting Dylan’s poetry.”⁷¹

Another leading 60s Dylanologist was Stephen Pickering, who edited and/or authored a number of works in what might be called “Jewish Dylanology,” including:

Aggadah: Studies in Bob Dylan and Torah Judaism

Kavannah: Mystic Steps and Dylaneutics

“Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door” and “Billy”: *A Jewish Speculation*

- and best known,

Stephen Pickering (Chofetz Chaim Ben-Avraham), *Bob Dylan Approximately: A Portrait of the Artist in Search of God, A Midrash* (NY: David McKay Co., 1975).

While most Jewhooing will come from Jews, it should be noted that Dylan’s Jewishness impressed non-Jews as much as it did Jews. As early as 1971, Australian Dylan critic Craig McGregor would write:

. . . there are three strands to Dylan’s work I’d like to add something about. One is its Jewishness. No one can come from a Jewish background without being profoundly influenced by it, whether the process is one of acceptance, compromise or rejection. Dylan is no exception, and one doesn’t need to know much about his change of name or his contradictory, carefully disguised relationship with his parents to realize it. . . . Recently Dylan seems to have been rediscovering his Jewishness all over again, coming to terms with it.⁷²

McGregor goes on to emphasize the religious imagery in Dylan’s music, implying its Jewish roots—it is a particularly Christian perspective, equating Jewish identity with religious affiliation. Not surprisingly, Dylan’s later bouts of religious revivalism—his “born again” phases—have occasioned much comment. Christian observers, like McGregor, see in it the return of the prodigal Jew. Jews, on the other hand, were subject to embarrassment and even shame by Dylan’s experimentations. To be sure, many Jews

⁷¹ Sounes, 263.

⁷² McGregor, 11.

lamented his conversion to Christianity, the same sort who rejoiced at his flirtation with Hasidism. But I think the majority of Dylan fans understood that he was beyond all that, that Bob Dylan represented something greater than religious fealty—he was, from the beginning, intent on breaking free of the past, his career an ongoing project of liberation and self-creation that would ultimately subvert whatever the past had to offer.

Yet the question of his Jewish identity persists—especially amongst Jews. For example, biographer Bob Spitz frames his study with vivid accounts of Dylan’s 1987 concert appearances in Israel—here he is portrayed as a Jewish returnee, representing to the Jewish people nothing less than their long-awaited messiah:

Was this any way for the Chosen People to live? Especially after waiting all this time for the Messiah? For twenty-five years they’d expected Him—*twenty-five years!* And all the time they remained faithful, undoubting, singing his praise. . . . Dylan had never played in Israel before, although his popularity there was enormous. In Israel, he was a true folk hero, a living legend celebrated under two different names: *Dylan*, the elusive superstar, and *Zimmerman*, the elusive Jew. “Robert Zimmerman—“ one of the newspapers gushed with anticipation, “the people of Israel, your countrymen, welcome you!”⁷³

Spitz adds that “Israel hadn’t witnessed such an extravaganza since . . . well, since Barbra Streisand’s visit in the early 1970s.” So much for the question of ethnic pride—for obvious reasons, Bob Dylan has become an icon of Jewish fame and success. But more critically, we are led to ask, how has this impacted the Jewish identity of those so willing to idolize him? Given that he does not present any sort of normative model of Jewish behavior, what does our knowledge of his Jewish background communicate and how does it further resonate? While Israelis responded to the sheer ethnicity of a world conquering ‘Jewish hero’ (though Spitz does note the context of the late eighties peace movement in Israel in which many looked to Dylan as a symbol of anti-war activism),

⁷³ Spitz, 1-2.

American Jews may have a more complex relationship to their own Jewishness, and hence, to Dylan's.

Conclusion

The assimilatory impulse evident in his life is all too familiar to American Jews, and our understanding of their reaction to Bob Dylan must begin with that basic fact. Is it too much to suggest that Dylan's assimilation *is* the Jewish behavior of his with which we identify? And if so, there may have been something different about his assimilatory path, something that gave Jews of that generation a clue as to the path they might take. Even as he rebelled against his Jewish past, Dylan also rejected the conventional alternative, the goal of joining the American majority and entering the cultural mainstream. He broke the mold on either end, carving out a third path by refusing to capitulate to either Jewish expectations or American norms. Clearly then, Dylan made no direct contribution to the Jewish revival of the post-sixties era—yet his contribution may have been substantial nonetheless. For in so definitively rejecting the old American dream of 'joining the club,' he showed Jews—and other outsiders—a way off the treadmill of assimilation.

All of the great Jewish intellectual, philosophical, moral and cultural contributions to humanity I can think of were products not of Jews living apart, but of our dispersal among the cultures of the world . Maimonides or Spinoza, Marx, Freud, Einstein or Derrida; Kafka, Proust or Primo Levi; Serge Gainsbourg or Daniel Barenboim; Lenny Bruce or Bob Dylan - I could go on ad nauseum - all are products of our interaction with diverse influences in the Diaspora.⁷⁴

Bob Dylan was hardly the first Jewish intellectual in modern history to proclaim his total liberation from his roots while refusing to join the established culture; nor was he the first to whom a generation of Jewish souls hearkened—Heine, Marx, and Freud come to mind, for example. But he was the first to do so in a way that both rejected the culture and celebrated it at once. He did so in his view of America—dismissive of its limitations, but

⁷⁴ Tony Karon, "How Jewish is Israel?" (internet posted article, 2006)

glorying at the same time in its liberating qualities. And perhaps the same duality can be seen in his attitude to his Jewishness, simultaneously condemnatory and celebratory—the latter perhaps unintentional on his part, but celebratory nonetheless. For his was a **Jewish** success story—in the eyes, anyway, of his fellow Jews—and that is what counts in the final analysis. Despite his own denials, Dylan is undeniably a famous Jew—one who became famous while singing “Hava Negilah” to other Jews in New York City—and, at a time when fellow Jewish artists like Barbra Streisand were making it big as well. In the end, it is this context—his cohort of fellow famous Jews—that gives Bob Dylan his incontrovertible Jewishness, despite his protestations to the contrary.