

## POPULAR CULTURE

## Seeking a poet for our times

Dylan's songs spoke to people in the '60s, but his time is gone and a successor – surely one is out there – has yet to emerge

BY JOHN MACDONALD

In this troubled time, coping with manmade and natural disasters, facts are plentiful — the recyclable resource of instant history.

But I'm looking for a poet.

And I wonder: Is it accidental in the United States that, in the midst of our national, divisive angst so reminiscent of the 1960s, Bob Dylan sings again?

Death creeps through the Gulf coast and Baghdad like an acrid fog while millions are introduced to A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall — less a coincidence than a sign.

*I saw a white ladder all covered with water,  
I saw ten thousand talkers whose tongues were all broken,  
I saw guns and sharp swords in the hands of young children.*

Reporters, generals and politicians extrude fact. Poets give truth to fact, painting colour on the bone-white walls of the past. So I've marvelled at the convergence of Iraq, Katrina and Rita with the release of No Direction Home: Bob Dylan, a deep and thoughtful film by director Martin Scorsese about Dylan and his piercing impact on the American consciousness in that most turbulent decade.

It couldn't come at a better time, and Dylan's re-emergence is a sign we've had enough facts, enough reality for several lifetimes. We, especially children, want someone to tell us what it all means. Dylan set his poems to music in the early 1960s and millions of young people spoke vicariously through his odd, powerful tone.

I'm conservative in my approach to supposed brilliance. Though fortunate to have spent lots of time with very successful, intelligent and important people, I can count on one hand those I'd consider "brilliant." We assign the label liberally, but by definition it's rare.

In his songwriting, Dylan was simply brilliant. No other description does justice to a man whose strange, scattered manner — for journalists, interviewing Bob Dylan must be like trying to catch a cricket — masked an amazing clarity, an ability to lyrically cut deep into a collective subconscious.

*You don't need a weatherman  
To know which way the wind blows.*

However, No Direction Home makes a strong case that Dylan was an accidental icon. A product of the small, iron-mining town of Hibbing, Minn., young Robert Zimmerman was no folk prodigy. "You couldn't be a rebel — it was too cold," he deadpanned.

But in addition to the name change, other things evolved in the young, unknown minstrel: channelling the legendary folksinger, Woody Guthrie; prowling the artistically fertile streets of Greenwich Village; isolation and focus, the jet fuels of expression.

More than anything, Dylan collided with a decade. Nothing drove his success more than his clever knack of seeing himself from a distance, knowing exactly when and



LOS ANGELES TIMES

Bob Dylan in 1992. The songwriter is the subject of a new movie, *No Direction Home: Bob Dylan*, directed by Martin Scorsese.

where he stood, understanding that his sound was extraordinary — a perfect match for his era.

He courted the '60s like a man in love for the first time, bursting with the naive poetry and passion only fools understand.

*Yes, to dance beneath the diamond sky with one hand  
waving free,  
Silhouetted by the sea, circled by the circus sands,  
With all memory and fate driven deep beneath the waves,  
Let me forget about today until tomorrow.*

Though his songs still echo, Dylan's time is gone. He was as much a product of the '60s as he was its defining voice, which makes me wonder about his successor, if there is one.

Who will follow Dylan's lead, as he did with Guthrie? Is anyone out there who can find the truth of our decade in words and notes? Can she sort through Katrina's destruction? Can he explain terrorism or Iraq without a party platform?

The answer is yes. Though it's possible we've already met — the bold Kanye West, the pounding, heady awareness of Green Day, Alicia Keys' life song-stories — I doubt this poet has been recognized, mostly because young people have yet to fully embrace our nation's problems as their own, their future.

When that happens, someone will provide the voice. Today she may be in high school, or the teenage boy mowing your lawn. The poems are being written.

*There was music in the cafes at night  
And revolution in the air.*

Like the warm, humid air that drives a hurricane, the United States swirls with discontent. Listening to Dylan, one must wonder when the next hard rain's a-gonna fall — and who will tell a new generation to pack an umbrella.

• *John MacDonald is a resident of Tempe, Ariz., and a public affairs consultant.*

## Canada increasingly has no national government

No great political expertise is needed to guess that Prime Minister Paul Martin will respond to Quebec's demands for its own voice in foreign affairs with a firm, "No. Non."

A similarly minimal level of political knowledge will be enough to cause any observer to take for granted that Martin's eventual position on the Ottawa-Quebec negotiations on foreign affairs that began this week will be, "Yes. Oui."

With an election looming, Martin won't want to confirm that he repeatedly folds under provincial pressure. Once the election is past, everything changes.

This will happen most particularly because a Quebec provincial election will then lie ahead and to win it federalist Premier Jean Charest is going to need all the help he can get.

Except for the details, it's therefore already a done deal.

The change will be considerable. Monique Gagnon-Tremblay, Quebec's Minister of International Relations — a federalist Liberal remember, and so, as these things go, a moderate — has



RICHARD GWYN

already staked out the ground that she, and the province, want to occupy.

It's extensive. Quebec must have "access to all information" on all issues that concern it, must be "a full member" of Canadian delegations, must have the right to "speak for itself" on topics that interest the province and must have the right to appear before "arbitration bodies of international organizations" (the World Trade Organization, for example) when "Quebec or its interests are at stake."

Then comes the proposal that really matters.

Quebec's "right to give its consent before Canada signs" any treaty or in-

ternal agreement in which its interests are involved, "must be recognized."

Since provincial interests now cover just about every cultural, social and economic topic, other than Canada Post, Quebec is demanding a virtual veto over a broad sweep of international affairs.

Gagnon-Tremblay deserves credit for candour: "Some like to assume that Canada must speak with a single voice on the international stage," she writes. This "is a misunderstanding of the very nature of the Canadian federation," she continues. "The world also needs to hear the 'voice of the provinces.'"

Give Gagnon-Tremblay credit also for smarts. The constitution, she notes, is "mute" on who has jurisdiction over international affairs.

Although everyone assumes the opposite, she is, in fact, quite right. We didn't become a country in 1867. We were a colony of Britain before Confederation. We remained a colony thereafter, for more than half a century. The Fathers of Confederation never talked about international affairs.

Counter-arguments to all of this do exist. Former ambassador to Washington Allan Gotlieb, who under Pierre Trudeau fought off Quebec's attempts to get into international affairs back in the 1970s, has already expressed them forcefully.

Gotlieb, who really is in the know politically, ought to have saved his breath.

The reason it's already a done deal is because Ottawa is already doing what Gagnon-Tremblay is demanding. It's holding, this week, a closed discussion on international affairs with Quebec alone.

Why a closed meeting on so vital a national topic? Why Quebec alone rather than all the provinces?

And why is Ottawa allowing Quebec to set the agenda without having first set out its own position and then gathered in opinion from across the country on whether Canadians believe we should "speak with a single voice" rather than with a clamorous cacophony?

The answer to those questions, and the reason why what's happening is

happening, is that Ottawa basically agrees with Gagnon-Tremblay.

What Ottawa agrees with — although I have no sense it actually understands what it is doing — is the proposition that the federal government no longer represents Canada.

It's not, that's to say, our national government. It's a government, stuck up there in Ottawa, with certain specific responsibilities (an ever-diminishing number as the provinces take over more and more).

I've long been of the view that Canada is now a post-modern state, the first of its kind in the world in which few of the old rules about identity and belonging apply.

In a certain sense, we are also becoming pre-modern. We're going back to medieval Italy, as a collection of city-states. Out of it came the Renaissance and some great cooking, but also a lot of violence and bloodshed. The quality of our cooking is pretty good.

• *Richard Gwyn is a Toronto-based writer and chancellor of St. Jerome's University in Waterloo.*

## Two-tier municipal system is best model for region

Where does Kitchener end? Is Cambridge really a part of Waterloo Region? Do the political structures that manage this region match the communities that elect them?

Walk up King Street West between Grand River Hospital and the old Clarica headquarters and you can tell where Kitchener ends and Waterloo begins only because the cities have placed signs at King and Mount Hope streets. One block on either side, neither Park Street nor Mary Street tells you where the border lies.

A few kilometres south, Highway 401 divides Kitchener from Cambridge more effectively than a wall could. There is no question that Cambridge residents in that city's Galt, Hespeler and Preston communities have more in common with each other than they do with Kitchener. Despite this, many Cambridge residents commute to jobs in Waterloo, some hopping aboard Grand River Transit's iXpress where a few years ago they had to rely on intercity buses.

Municipal governments should

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JAMES BOW

reflect the communities they govern, but what happens when communities nest? We identify ourselves in multiple ways; when other residents ask us where we live, we point to a neighbourhood, or an intersection, or an old community such as Doon or Preston.

To residents from farther away, we talk about living in Kitchener or Waterloo or Woolwich Township. To other areas of the province, we sell ourselves as Waterloo Region, Kitchener-Waterloo, or Canada's Technology Triangle.

This is the principle behind Waterloo Region's two-tier system of government. The upper tier, regional tier pro-

sides over the same area administered by seven local councils. But responsibilities are split so the upper-tier takes on regional issues and the local councils, with closer ties to smaller communities, respond to their issues.

Discussion has surfaced on revamping the regional relationship. I welcome this because communities don't remain static and neither should the political bodies that represent them.

Unfortunately, such discussions can become heated. Back in 2000, some suggested we had too many politicians on the various councils. Some advocated amalgamation, while others talked about removing the region and allowing member municipalities to go their own way. Both proposals were flawed.

It makes no sense for Cambridge residents to have a say over on-street parking in Elmira. On the other hand, the location of jobs in Kitchener very much affects workers living in Woolwich or Wellesley as does the availability of good roads and transit to get to and from those jobs.

Waterloo Region has an advantage

over other regional governments. The upper tier governs the entire region, with no part left out. Metropolitan Toronto eventually failed because the region it needed to administer, the Greater Toronto Area, grew beyond Metro Toronto's borders, to the point where there was no reason for Metro to exist as a regional council.

But the greatest flaw I see about the current local arrangement is that the two tiers of Waterloo Region are separated. Regional councillors sit only on regional council and, except for the mayors, have no contact with the local councils that share their territory.

Such a split creates a second city whose jurisdiction overlaps the councils beneath it, sparking conflict. This split doomed Winnipeg's first regional government just 10 years after it started. The change to split councils in Toronto in 1988 sparked huge battles and jurisdictional gridlock that led to the megacity amalgamation nine years later.

The fact that the lower-tier mayors sit on Waterloo Region council, provid-

ing almost half the votes, has saved this area from similar conflicts, but whatever reform occurs to Waterloo Region, we must never let go of the understanding that the regional government is the place where member municipalities get together to discuss common issues. It is a boxing ring where the participants duke it out, not a boxer itself.

It has been suggested that local councils, such as the one in Kitchener, are too small, running the risk that the meetings become too closed and parochial. Asking Kitchener's regional councillors to join these meetings would be a good fix.

Waterloo Region will change and its councils should be prepared to change with it, but the changes should always respect the nest of communities within Waterloo Region.

The two-tier model reflects this reality the best.

• *James Bow of Kitchener is a graduate of the University of Waterloo's regional and urban planning department.*