

Bob Dylan, Republican Party Animal

by Con Chapman

There was no point in arguing with Dave [Van Ronk], not intellectually anyway. I had a primitive way of looking at things and I liked country fair politics. My favorite politician was Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater.

Bob Dylan, Chronicles, Vol. 1

Saturday morning; I'm sitting in the cellphone lot at Logan Airport, waiting for the call from Terminal B—or is it C?, I always get them confused despite their distinctive names. When it comes, I will make my way back through spaghetti strands of roadway to pick up the man who wrote and recorded what Rolling Stone magazine called the greatest song of all time. I think there's a conflict of interest because the song's title is “Like a Rolling Stone,” but this is Massachusetts, where conflicts of interest are the daily bread, nay, the Hostess Twinkie, of our polity.

That's right—Bob Dylan, *ne* Robert Allen Zimmerman—will be riding shotgun with me as we head north to fight the good fight against the Democratic Party's war on women.

It had taken a long time for me to realize that Dylan might be a kindred political soul. I was aware that the only politician he'd ever endorsed was Barry Goldwater, but I had long assumed it was because they were fellow Members of the Tribe, and that Dylan/Zimmerman only supported Goldwater because he would have been America's first Jewish president.

Barry Goldwater: Dylan's fav!

But then I started to do a little research. There was “Oxford Town,” his song about the ordeal James Meredith went through in order to enroll at the then-all-white University of Mississippi;

Democratic Governor Ross Barnett was the one who tried to block his path.

There was his quip to USA Today about the song “Let's Impeach the President” on Neil Young's anti-George Bush album “Living With War.” “What's funny about the Neil record,” Dylan remarked, “when I heard ‘Let's Impeach the President . . . I said, ‘That's crazy, he's doing a song about Clinton?’”

And then there was the 2004 concert of anti-Bush musicians organized by Bruce Springsteen. Dylan's name was mentioned in the advance press as one of the stars who would campaign for John Kerry in swing states, but he demurred. Maybe it was the presumption of the thing—assuming that Dylan would share a stage with Springsteen, a pretender to his throne from New Jersey—or maybe it went deeper.



Marilinda Garcia

And so I gave him a call and asked if he'd be willing to do a little outreach to undecided voters in New Hampshire to help a female GOP state rep who's running for Congress. Marilinda Garcia is half-Italian, half-Hispanic, a Harvard grad, an accomplished harpist who has taught music at several universities. She had to be stopped, so Democratic males compared her to a porn star. When they were called on it, they apologized—to the porn star.

My phone rings, and my guess is it's Bob.

“Hello?”

"How many hours must a man wait in line, before his ride finally arrives?"

"I didn't know you were here—I'll be right over."

He's standing at the curb, suitcase in his hand, post-*Freewheelin'* glower firmly in place.



Glower Power

"Great to meet you!" I exclaim as he gets in, like a stupid autograph hound.

"No you're not. How many albums of mine have you ever bought?"

I gulp; he's got me there. There was *Greatest Hits, Vol. II*, with pretentious Roman numerals as if he's a Super Bowl or something. And there was *Highway 61 Revisited*, which my high school girlfriend Candy called me on. "You don't really like that, do you?" she asked. "You're just trying to be cool."

This was the woman whom I'd spent many happy hours doing the boogaloo and shing-a-ling with, dancing to the music of The Temptations, Wilson Pickett, and Sam & Dave. She knew me too well.

"Not that many, but I've got a couple of your songs on my iPod."

"How many by me?"

"Uh—just one. *Tomorrow is a Long Time*."

"That girl Kiki turned you onto that, didn't she?"

What is it with me—am I like the Visible Man, the plastic model of a human whose innards were exposed to the world in the hobby shops of my youth? Is my every thought and feeling available for public inspection?



"Yes. But I've got *You Ain't Goin' Nowhere* by The Byrds, and I've got the reggae version of *The Mighty Quinn* by Bradley Brown."

"Yeah, that's a classic. Who's this woman you want me to help?"

"New Hampshire state rep."

"So, a girl from the north country?"

It must be hard when so much of your work has ended up permeating the spirit of the times that you can't keep from quoting yourself.

"That's right."

"GOP has done a lot for women," he says broodingly, and I can tell that he's irked by the current strategy of the Democratic Party; find some ignoramus from Chitlin' Switch, Mississippi who is willing to be quoted saying something stupid, then tar good, decent moderate Republicans with it. The heirs of Nelson Rockefeller, who died the way we all want to go; a heart attack after sex with a woman he

wasn't married to. As they said at the time, he thought he was coming, but he was going.

"I know what you mean," I said. "First woman elected to the House and Senate . . ."



Margaret Chase Smith

"Margaret Chase Smith," he replies, as we begin a game of GOP "dozens," going at each other *mano a mano* to see who knows more Republican Party folklore. "First female Supreme Court Justice?"

"Sandra Day O'Connor, a Reagan appointee," I reply. "First African-American Secretary of State?"

"Condoleezza Rice," he says, then waves off any further competition to light a smoke.

"So the rumors really were true?" I say as he cracks his window a bit.

"What rumors?"

"That you're a closet Republican?"

He turns and glares at me, the same look I imagine that he used to train on dimwitted reporters from Time who wanted a quote from The Voice of a Generation. "What if I am?"

"That would be okay with me," I say, "although not with most of your fans. If you'd come out, you'd be joining a long list of revolutionary artists of the 20th century who were Republicans."

"Like who?"



Zora Neale Hurston

"Edward Hopper. e.e. cummings. Duke Ellington. W.C. Handy. Zora Neale Hurston. Jack Kerouac."

"Kerouac?" I've piqued his interest. The Lowell, Mass. native produced the long-form literary work that Dylan once yearned to create, but my guess is he realizes no one will ever compare *Tarantula* to *On the Road*.

We cross the border into the "Live Free or Die" state, and it's almost as if a weight has been lifted from The Great One's shaggy mane. "I don't know how you stand to live in Massachusetts, man," he says with disgust. "Founded by Puritans, and they're still in charge."

"I know what you mean," I say. "Did you know you can't smoke in a public park in Boston anymore?"

"Figures. Do they put you in the stocks?"

"No. First offense is a \$250 fine. Repeat offenders have to listen to Aerosmith covers of Tiny Bradshaw's *Train Kept a Rollin'*."

"That was problem with most rockers. Instead of going back to the original, they just copied the last white group who covered the song—The Yardbirds."

"I know. I'm always quoting you on that point."

"You mean 'I don't steal from anyone who hasn't been dead at least 50 years'?"

We both crack up, and when I calm down I realize I almost missed my exit in Plaistow, where we've been invited to a ham 'n bean supper of the Rockingham County Republican Club. We pull into the parking lot of the Italo-American hall just off 95 North where we're greeted by Harrison Knopf, Secretary-Treasurer of the group. I make a note to talk to him afterwards since he's the one who has to reimburse me for tolls and mileage.

Dylan makes the rounds and, since he's 72 years old, he fits right in. He compliments Addie Bayless on her Republican cloth coat and graciously accepts a present from Bob Marquis, the club President; an autographed first edition of his self-published biography of our only unelected president, "Gerald Ford: Former Model, Model President."



It's clear that, just as the internet message boards say, in a private setting such as this Dylan is *tres simpatico* with these fans of free-market economics, fiscal conservatism and a strong national defense. On the last point, he's challenged by Mort Pressy, a state legislator, to point to just one of his many songs where the man who wrote "Masters of War" has departed from the gospel of unilateral disarmament of the no-nukes crowd.

I think he's going to refer to his 1968 interview in *Sing Out!* magazine, in which he said he remained friends with a man who supported the Vietnam War. When he was pressed on the point, Dylan asked the interviewer "Anyhow, how do you know that I'm not, as you say, for the war?"

Instead, he gives Pressy a look that says "You're on" without uttering a word. I happen to have brought along my acoustic guitar, just in case someone asked for a song. Dylan takes it from me, tunes it a bit, then begins to sing:

"Everybody's building, the big ships and boats."

