

WATCHTOWER INSIGHTS

What remains to be said about this enigmatic song, the "scorpion song that stings itself to death" (Ricks), the song that, of all his considerable canon, Dylan chooses to perform more often than any other? (Having been first past the 1,000 post in April 1997, at the time of writing Watchtower is closing in on the 2,000 career outings mark, currently just 76 short.) Does he perform it so much because he thinks it the song that people most want to hear? That would probably be true of #2 - #6 on his Most Often list, for LARS (1789 performances), H61 (1548), Tangled (1080), Blowin' (1057) and Maggie's (1051) are all arguably more strongly identified with Dylan than is Watchtower. This is because, though Bob himself hardwired certain songs – Rolling Stone, Thin Man, Desolation Row – into the soundtrack of our lives, in the case of Watchtower the job fell, courtesy of an expansive *it used to be like that* makeover, to Jimi Hendrix, who succeeded so well that many casual fans probably think each Dylan rendition a Hendrix cover, just as my daughter, on hearing Bob's Heaven's Door, squealed "Ooh, a Guns 'n' Roses song!"

[Note: Although these lines were written in 2010, and although All Along the Watchtower was dropped from the set list in November 2018, as of March 2024 it remains Dylan's most performed song (2283). Of the ten songs to have been performed 1,000 or more times, eight are from the 1960s, Tangled Up In Blue (#4, on 1725) in from the seventies, and – remarkably – Things Have Changed (#10, on 1058) is from 2000.]

In modelling (more's the pity) his every live version on Jimi's iconic template rather than his more modest, homespun own, Dylan does nothing, either, to try and reclaim a more personal identification with his work, and to look at it on paper – three verses, twelve lines, just 130 words – it is indeed a singularly unprepossessing mite, hardly worth, you'd think, the candle. The contrast between it and *JWH* confrere Frankie Lee & Judas Priest (eleven verses, 88 lines) is stark – yet what the juxtaposed narrative styles (flabby and callow alongside laconic and honed) prove most conclusively is that less *can* be more. Priest's career performance total of twenty (and that's at least nineteen too many) pales beside the other's mega-score, and the stats (here if not always) surely bear reliable witness to the two songs' relative merit.

But do fans still welcome Watchtower? Familiarity breeds contempt, they say, and I suspect that, to many Bobsessives, AATW is a tune long dead (cause: *exposure*). To Dylan, though, it clearly remains very much alive, or why continue to play it on so regular a basis (indeed, most often, now, to close the show, thus elevating its status even more)? That so apparently slight a thing should prove so durable; that so seeming small a thing should prove deceptively spacious and capacious as Doctor Who's Tardis – must this not inevitably induce in its creator, austere as may be, a tickle of pride? And, if it does, *should* it? Is there *really* more to this "simple" song than meets the eye and assails the ear or is it yet another case, like Lenny Bruce or Workingman's Blues, of the Emperor's new clothes? Here's how some others see it:

(1) Herb Bowie (from *Reason To Rock*; used with permission):

All Along the Watchtower is spare and restrained. The song consists of only three verses, with no chorus. The language is simple. Yet the three verses are packed with meaning and drama. Let's see how it starts:

"There must be some way out of here," said the joker to the thief

Notice how Dylan starts the song by throwing us into the middle of a conversation, and begins with an urgent statement. We don't know where the "here" is from which the speaker wants to escape, but we know he wants out. The sense of drama is immediate. We find out that the two people speaking are "the joker" and "the thief". These are archetypal characters that have existed in one form or another for thousands of years. By identifying them in this way, Dylan invokes a sense of timelessness. Because these figures are broad archetypes, there is already a suggestion that this might be a parable of some sort, a story whose essence remains the same over many different times, places and characters. The joker, or jester, can be seen in general to represent the artist: someone whose role is to amuse other members of the established order, but also to provoke them, to suggest alternate ways of looking at reality. And, of course, the joker and the thief are both outsiders of a sort, united in their separation from more ordered segments of society.

*There's too much confusion, I can't get no relief
Businessmen, they drink my wine, plowmen dig my earth
None of them along the line know what any of it is worth*

The rest of the verse tells us why the joker wants to escape: there is too much confusion. But what is confused? Others are benefiting from his labors, and working for him to help produce the results. But neither understands the worth of their efforts. So the confusion is about values: what is valuable and what is not.

*"No reason to get excited," the thief he kindly spoke
"There are many here among us who feel that life is but a joke
But you and I, we've been through that and this is not our fate
So let us not talk falsely now, the hour is getting late"*

The second verse begins with the thief speaking "kindly" to the joker. This adverb lets us know that he is sympathetic and that he, perhaps, understands the worth of the joker and his efforts. The thief goes on to say that, while there are those who think that life is "but a joke," the thief and the joker know better, having lived through that. So while others may still be confused, these two are not. Since they understand the value of life, it is important for them to be truthful with one another. Then the last line of the verse brings us back from exposition to a sense of drama and movement, and impending action: "the hour is getting late".

*All along the watchtower princes kept the view
While all the women came and went, barefoot servants too
Outside in the distance a wildcat did growl
Two riders were approaching, the wind began to howl*

The beginning of this final verse suddenly shifts the scene, without at first giving us any sense of how this new setting connects to the first one. In contrast to the first two verses, which were full of conversation, this verse unfolds almost cinematically, full of visual imagery. This new scene is populated with princes, women, and barefoot servants, establishing a time and place in the past, although again using enduring, archetypal figures. These figures guarding their castle seem to represent established society, and the existing power structure. But what are they guarding against?

A wildcat growls from a distance, suggesting the savage, untamed power of nature lurking just beyond the well-ordered lights of the castle. Then we see the two riders approaching. Suddenly, in only four words, the first two verses are connected with the last. With a sort of cinematic establishing shot, but used at the end of the story rather than the beginning, we see the thief and the joker approaching the castle. We already know that they want to establish a different set of values, one based on the worth of human life. Their approach towards the guarded castle suggests an impending confrontation. And then the last line of the song strengthens this suggestion with imagery of a furious storm starting to build.

Note how this last verse has made physical the relationships suggested in the previous lines. The thief, joker and wildcat are all placed outside the castle, which is occupied by princes and servants. So we now have, in a very concrete sense, independent outsiders and a rigid power hierarchy.

Dylan's accomplishment here is nothing less than amazing. In the space of three verses, in a song so spare it could almost be missed as a throwaway, Dylan manages to:

- Summarize his own life to date. Given his earlier efforts to make pointed fun of almost everything around him, and his near-fatal motorcycle crash that marked a turning point in his career, it is hard not to see the joker as Dylan himself. He has now learned that life is not a joke, and distinguishes between artists and outsiders who understand the seriousness of life, versus the businessmen and fans who treat his art as simply a marketable commodity.
- Identify the primary issue of our time as one of values ... In earlier songs Dylan talked tirelessly of modern figures misunderstanding the significance of issues such as war, freedom and poverty. Here Dylan stands back from these specific issues and reduces the confrontation to its essential element: human values against the established order.
- Propel his theme with a powerful dramatic structure. From a traditional dramatic viewpoint, almost nothing happens in this song:

two riders talk to each other while approaching a castle. We've hardly got a decent first act, let alone a whole play. Yet, by repeatedly hinting at the intensity of a coming confrontation and by identifying the two opposing forces, Dylan keeps us on the edges of our seats, wondering what will happen next. The effect at the end is comparable to the conclusion of William Butler Yeats' famous poem "The Second Coming":

*And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches towards
Bethlehem to be born?*

In both cases, there is a perceptible chill creeping up the spine, as the poet leaves his reader to contemplate the inevitability and intensity of the coming confrontation, and its consequences.

(2) From ER, October 2006 (poster Takila):

All Along The Watchtower ends with the lines *Outside in the distance a wildcat did growl / Two riders were approaching, the wind began to howl*. The Sergio Leone movie *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* begins with the growl of a wildcat, the whistle of the wind and the approach of two riders. Now, that could be a coincidence, but maybe it's not. The movie was released in 1966 and the song in 1967.

(Other suggested keys include *The Lord of the Rings* (hobbits are ALWAYS barefoot ...), the Crucifixion (*wine = blood, earth = body*), the Parable of the Tenants, The Book of Kings, the Vietnam war, The Record Industry, Tarot ...)

(3) Robert Shelton (from *No Direction Home*, NEL, 1986, page 393):

ALL ALONG THE WATCHTOWER (2:28) Perhaps [*John Wesley Harding's*] high point. After a menacing guitar introduction, intense singing and mood mix colloquial speech with archaic setting and personae. Emptiness is peopled with the joker, a wise fool out of *King Lear*. And the dialogue with the thief supports the theory that both are Dylan's contradictory spirits in dialogue. Gabrielle Goodchild: "The watchtower seems related to the fortified city as a recurring image for the moral state of man or the body politic. Here the

moral order seems to be threatened by the duality Dylan sees within himself of clown and holy pickpocket."

Are the mysterious pair inside or outside humankind's fortified city, trapped or exiled? "The question is the answer." Is it worse to be locked in or locked out? In George Jackson, Dylan said that some of us are prisoners and some are guards, but there's little difference. Jack McDonough linked (All Along The Watchtower) to Isaiah, Chapter 21, foretelling the fall of Babylon ... At this time, Dylan must have felt that businessmen were drinking his earnings and that critics and listeners were trampling his soil. Dylan had great praise for the Hendrix recording, and strong memories of the man.

Isaiah, 21:5-9 (KJV):

Prepare the table, watch in the watchtower, eat, drink: arise, ye princes, and anoint the shield / For thus hath the Lord said unto me, Go, set a watchman, let him declare what he seeth / And he saw a chariot with a couple of horsemen, a chariot of asses, and a chariot of camels; and he hearkened diligently with much heed / And he cried, A lion: My lord, I stand continually upon the watchtower in the daytime, and I am set in my ward whole nights / And, behold, here cometh a chariot of men, with a couple of horsemen. And he answered and said, Babylon is fallen, is fallen; and all the graven images of her gods he hath broken unto the ground.

(4) Online post by Jesperd, dated 7 December 2004:

Dylan is both the thief and the joker – the thief because he saw himself as a poet "stealing" ideas ... from older traditional songs ... and a joker because he was well aware that his lyrics confused his listeners and often intentionally lacked the deeper meaning that so many seeking fans wanted to find ... I think that the key to the song is the line *So let us not talk falsely now, the hour is getting late*. Dylan didn't want to be labelled as a protest or folk singer. He wanted to be a "simple" artist who wrote songs about love, hate, everything. And maybe he felt a bit like a hypocrite when people thought (him) political ... when in fact he never really planned on being a

"protest singer" at all. (So) Dylan ... wrote this song which could be interpreted in so many ways ...

(5) From ER, September 2010 (posters bottle of bread / Long Johnny):

Q: Why would a Joker lament the issue of thievery perpetrated against him ... to a thief?

A: Because ... Dylan was clearly influenced by that tradition in American fiction – the best example perhaps Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*, also O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* – that features the traditional "low-lives" of society in roles in which they end up being morally superior to the upper crust types who have to screw their own families to get the riches they crave. Bankers and thieves are both robbers, but the thief doesn't join the rotary club and Kiwanis. You can see the impact of Brando's film *The Wild Ones* on Gates of Eden – "the motorcycle black Madonna two-wheeled gypsy queen" who makes "the gray flannel dwarf ... scream".

A variation took hold in cinema around the (same) time in films with the moral "It's the normal people who are crazy and the lunatics who are sane." Films like *King of Hearts* (1966), *A Fine Madness* (1966) and *They Might Be Giants* (1971).

Bob is definitely stepping in those streams.

(6) Online post by Backstage, dated 30 March 2005:

It's cool that a 37-year-old song can still get people to think and, more, to discuss meaning. That's the power of poetry. I've been listening to this song since 1968 and have a few thoughts. Back then Dylan was not writing or talking about Jesus at all, certainly not in any way that foreshadowed his conversion experience ten years later. But he had written poetry for a long time about the meaning of life and our dilemmas as thinking beings. What is there to believe in? What has real meaning? Is there anyone we can trust? What is the risk of stepping outside the norms and commonplace meanings of things and looking at ourselves directly? This song, I think, borrows a mythical style and setting to set up the problem of meaninglessness in our existence. The two personalities are both outsiders, a joker who

lacks conventional dignity and a thief who lacks conventional morality. They are outside of the walls of psychological safety, where the regular social order still holds, despite the threats from wolves and howling winds. I read these as metaphors for the psychological dangers one must face when throwing off easy explanations of life's meaning. One must be very brave to be outside those walls. But there is no going back once you have cast off conventions – "You and I, we've been through that, and this is not our fate; let us not talk falsely now, the hour is getting late." This is a crisis, he's saying – a crisis of existence itself.

So, it's the opposite of an endorsement of Christianity or any other religion. It's a description of the land where a seeker of truth must find his own way, whatever the dangers may be.

This song, in its three little stanzas, is wonderful writing and courageous personal philosophy. This is why Dylan was and still is considered one of our culture's great voices.

(7) Paul Williams (from *Watching The River Flow*, Omnibus Press, 1996, page 29):

The most delightful aspect of the song (is that) its ends have been twisted, and taped together ... (with) the end seeming to be in the middle of things and the beginning stuck in there on the third verse. (Only now) can the real claustrophobia of the Joker come through ...

(8) Online post by Woodshadow, dated 25 December 2008:

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* opens on the tower of the watch. Joyce's *Ulysses* opens in a watchtower. Dylan's song, when taken in its logical order (i.e. third stanza first) also opens on a watchtower [note: the song, arranged this way, also then *begins with its title*, as do most others on *JWH*]. The original biblical reference [\[see Shelton above\]](#) was obviously known to all three (writers) but that knowledge is probably coincidental, a mere simple twist of fate.

(9) From ER, September 2010 (poster Bennyboy):

You (make a) fundamental mistake (in) ascribing "real meaning" to art. Mystery and exoticism are at the heart of Dylan's work ... and to try to get to some fictional truth at the bottom of any of his songs is to completely miss the point. You have to listen with a mind bypassing logic.

(10) Willa Cather (1873-1947) in *The Song of the Lark* (1915):

... what (is) any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself – life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose?

(With thanks to all contributors)