

# Back Pages

By [Gordon D. Marino](#) in the [May 31, 2005](#) issue

## In Review

# BOB DYLAN



# CHRONICLES

THE LIFE

## Chronicles: Volume One

Bob Dylan

Simon & Schuster

Doink! A neighborhood kid kicked a ball that nearly punched out my kitchen window. I shot out into the backyard ready to deliver a lecture, but the angular teen disarmed

me with a smile and a “Sorry, Mister.” I picked up the ball and asked him his name.

“Dylan,” he replied. “After the guy from up the road in Hibbing?” I asked. “Huh?” he muttered. “Bob Dylan,” I explained. “Yeah,” he replied, cracking a smile. “Do you listen to him much?” I pressed. Dylan replied, “Nope, but my dad plays him all the time.” “That’s ‘cause he has good taste,” I said, tossing the ball back over the fence.

Although Bob Dylan might not sell as many albums as Bon Jovi, there must be a half a million children and young men named after him. Apparently, it was not just the kids on the edge who harkened to the herald of the 1960s and ’70s, but the Eagle Scouts and the sons and daughters of accountants as well.

Truth be told, I started out as a lost little boy and grew up to be a not-so-happy camper, but I have always been able to find a quiet place by the river in Dylan’s existential blues. Though I don’t think much of the bean-counter approach to blessings, I count myself blessed to have been Dylan’s contemporary.

For all my Dylan posters, however, I would never have imagined that he could twist his thoughts into straightforward prose and make direct sense of his life. I have heard him interviewed a few times, and he always sounded like he was either high or putting someone on or off. But Dylan has always defied expectations, and the first panel of his triptych self-portrait is honest, clear and deserving of all the kudos it has received, a National Book Award nomination included.

Readers will close the covers of *Chronicles* feeling as though they have a better understanding of the man behind the songs. But the book is not exactly a backstage pass. As other reviewers have remarked, *Dylan* is mum about growing up Jewish in the northern Minnesota Iron Range. There are only a few paragraphs about his parents and his high school pals. His brother, who produced *Blood on the Tracks*, does not come on stage at all, and though Dylan describes his desperate attempts to protect his family from the juggernaut of his fame, he never mentions the names of his wives and children.

However, when it comes to his muse and his music, the bard from the north country sings. Over the years, Dylan has offered a number of self-creation myths, but the true story is that the artist formerly known as Robert Zimmerman (b. 1941) dropped out of the University of Minnesota in 1961 and headed east to the Big Apple. Dylan reconstructs his frame of mind as he entered into the arteries of Manhattan:

It wasn't money or love that I was looking for. I had  
a heightened sense of awareness, was set in my ways,  
impractical and a visionary to boot. My mind was strong  
like a trap and I didn't know a single soul in this dark  
freezing  
metropolis but that was all about to change.

That heightened sense of awareness, combined with an almost religious sense of his own fate, forms the ground bass of Dylan's life and his life story.

When he first crossed the Hudson, Dylan was literally a minor, but within a couple of trips around the sun he became a pulsar on the folk and then the rock scene. I always had the impression that Dylan was shot out of the cannon of his own lyrical talent, but *Chronicles* traces a more mundane trajectory, from the nights when he played backup for change at the Café Wha? and other dives to the moment he was magically swept up into the big leagues by John Hammond of Columbia Records.

In the early, back pages of his life, the writing did not come with the rain like the sheets of inspiration that visited him in the mid-1960s. He stumbled along, breaking pencils and wearing down erasers without writing anything that would hint at the likes of "Blowing in the Wind" or "Love Minus Zero."

Though he has always presented himself as a highwayman/priest of the ethos of release, Dylan was a monkish student of music. When a friend or mentor would pass along a blues or folk album he hadn't heard, Dylan would acoustically ride the record like Ahab. He studied and soaked up everything from the folk songs of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger to the candy rock of Ricky Nelson. Lacking a hard word for anyone, *Chronicles* is in part a long thank-you note to the songsters whose body of work Dylan absorbed and transformed. Among the motley crew being thanked are Dave Van Ronk, Harry Belafonte, Jack Elliot and Robert Johnson.

Seemingly the most literate of the troubadours, Dylan had Kerouac and Corso in the stacks of his mind early on. But beyond the Beat authors, Dylan's literary curriculum largely depended on which volume he happened to glimpse on the shelf in front of the couch he was crashing on. *Chronicles* is chockablock with sometimes strange takes on Balzac, Melville, Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Marx and others. After a two-paragraph gloss on the Prussian general's *On War* Dylan concludes, "Reading Clausewitz you take your own thoughts a little less seriously."

Though there is very little that is chronological about it, *Chronicles* sharply illumines stretches of Dylan's personal Highway 61. The book is also a bounty of piquant stories. For example, in the mid-1950s Dylan was playing in the lobby of a National Guard armory when the wrestler Gorgeous George burst through the door. Dylan recalls, "He didn't break stride, but he looked at me, eyes flashing with moonshine. He winked and seemed to mouth the phrase 'You're keeping it alive.' . . . It was all the recognition and encouragement I would need for years to come."

There are stories about the prince of the counterculture playing on the set for John Wayne and of promenades with Robert Graves, a wacky vignette about an awkward attempt at collaboration with Archibald MacLeish, and Dylan's effusions about his favorite politician, Barry Goldwater. But the many curiosities aside, *Chronicles* dazzles for the fact that it mysteriously reverberates with Dylan's musical voice. Now and again some slice of a song slips into a sentence, and it always works.