

I Shall Be Unleashed

Bob Dylan Strikes a Canine Chord

WHILE I'VE READ THAT DYLAN HAS had many different dogs—everything from Beagles and Labs to St. Bernards and Great Danes (an eclectic bunch that seems to rival his varied musical styles)—his apparent affinity for them doesn't stop at the end of the leash.

If you've listened to just a little Dylan, you've no doubt heard dogs running loose in his lyrics. But until recently, I didn't realize how prominent they really are. I first picked up on it while playing the album *Infidels* (one of my favorites) and found myself crooning with Bob on a choice line from "Jokerman": "Resting in the fields, far from the turbulent space/Half asleep near the stars with a small dog licking your face." And after the words spilled out, I thought about it for a second. Earlier that day, while listening to "Highlands" from *Time out of Mind*, hadn't I heard him sing "I'm crossing the street to get away from a mangy dog/Talking to myself in a monologue"? And what about that line from the epic ballad "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall," something about a white man who walked a black dog? Why hadn't I picked up on this before?

Just thinking about it for a moment, I came up with a handful of other tracks that had a hound prowling around: "Gates of Eden," "Summer Days," "You Ain't Goin' Nowhere." So I dug a little deeper, listened to his music and discovered that dogs, in one manner or another, play into more than 30 of his songs.

Now, maybe he doesn't intend to do it, maybe dogs are just symbols that are occasionally freed from the stable of his mind, but they seem to inhabit his world and his thoughts, and, ultimately, come to life in his music.

For instance, there's a hound dog howling, appropriately, in the lament "Everything is Broken." In "Seven Curses," dogs are baying away during a dark moment of depravity. He conjures up a dog that talks in "You Ain't Goin' Nowhere." He even



wrote a song called "If Dogs Run Free," a wistful tune about freedom that proclaims "If dogs run free, then what must be/Must be, and that is all ... True love needs no company/

It can cure the soul/it can make it whole/If dogs run free."

Dylan uses dogs as messengers for mood, as sets for the stage. You can picture them wandering down dirt roads, or collapsed on creaky porches. They're dustbowl dogs and prowling alley dogs, dogs with no collars, dogs with no homes.

It's a hungry, lonesome quality about them that he touches upon, a sense of being tired and restless at the same time. They speak to the human condition that surrounds them, suggesting what really doesn't need to be said.

He also unleashes dogs symbolically. "I ain't your dog that's gone astray," he quips in "Got My Mind Made Up." In "Tell Me" he puts to a woman—rather testily it would seem—"What means more to you, a lap dog or a dead lion?" And in "Neighborhood Bully," the masses of opposition "wait for this bully like a dog waits to feed."

They seem to represent something a little more, well, primal in "Obviously Five Believers." In it, his "dog" is just barking away, and he says to an aloof lover, "Yes, I could tell you what he means, if I just didn't have to try so hard." Taken in the context of the whole song—especially when it lands on this line—there's a suggestion of needfulness, of longing, of the dog denoting his own yelping lust.

Dogs seem to be prevalent devices in Dylan's portraits of the world, helping define a place where it's not always easy to find the right home. Or, perhaps, that it's just better to roam. **B**

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