

Variations on a Theme: Driving With Dylan

Author : Guest Contributor

Categories : Music

Date : 18-02-2021

In the summer of 2012, I quit my office job and spent a month and a half on a solo cross-country road trip moving from Pittsburgh to San Francisco. It was the most unstructured time I'd had since Elementary school recess, but the truth was, I had little interest in making California my home. Still, at twenty-three, following my then-boyfriend's career while beginning my second attempt at entering graduate school sounded better than mooring myself to any one job.

I packed every corner of the '95 Mercedes E320 he'd asked me to drive for him with my necessities: clothing, books, cameras, laundry soap, and my two dogs. At stops along the Southern route, strangers eyed the black, boat-like car with curiosity. Some people let their gaze fall over me in awe like no one had ever quit a decent-paying job before. Other people showed concern, and offered me advice on sites to visit, places to avoid, and restaurants to eat at.

While I occasionally held extended conversations with my dogs about the weather or how far we should drive that day, most of my talking was out loud and to myself. No job waited for me in California, nor did my then-boyfriend have an apartment for us, so there really was no rush. The drive to escape my home and sustain myself with as little parental involvement as possible had pushed my motivation to the maximum. My mental health seemed to improve with every mile put between my dysfunctional family and me. I realized I had accomplished those teenage dreams of freedom, but I had outgrown the value system I'd patched together in the process. It was time to begin another cycle of reevaluating myself, questioning every angle until the image of who I wanted to be became clear. To prevent myself from becoming lost in my own mind, I searched for new rules and patterns with which to structure my life on the road. The answer was in my music collection.

To wake up, I'd start with energetic, moving rock. Something that made my chest ache with knowing I was alive. Midday, I settled into the rhythm of driving with Johnny Cash, or The White Stripes. As the sun set, I'd move into the staples of my music collection: heavy rock with droning bass, metal, and finally progressing into electronic. When it became so dark that it got light again from the stars, when I felt like no other soul was out there but me, I turned to Outkast and The Notorious B.I.G.

Somewhere between Palm Springs and San Diego, I set my music player to "random" and kept my finger near the "next" button because there is nothing stranger than feeling embarrassed alone. I remember driving down a main road around nine in the evening when I got stuck at a long red light. I watched people rush into a Trader Joe's with five minutes to close. In a flash-back to my night shift gas station days, I sent mental sympathy towards the check-out clerk who hadn't counted their register yet and would be forced to wait on those jerks.

The light turned green, and a new song from my "random" selection began. A guitar strummed briefly, then a voice. For the first two stanzas, I was so caught up in the words that I didn't realize who was singing. I finally checked my player's screen, revealing the information: Bob Dylan, Greatest Hits, "All I Really Want to Do." Despite my self-imposed hatred of Bob Dylan, and my vow to never listen to this album collection, I thought I knew what he sounded like. In the car, outside of a closing Trader Joe's, I heard a voice of honesty. This person wasn't trying to impress me— he just had something to share. The song played with my finger hovering above the next button. When the song ended, I played it again.

Then, I turned off the audio system and sat in the hum of the tires pulling me further along. The box of memories I had taped closed and pushed far back in my mind for five years broke open.

My father's involvement while we lived together as a family was inconsistent and fleeting. Besides his long hours at his corporate engineering job, I remember my father occupying three places: his chair by the TV, his home office next to the garage, or his basement woodshop with power tools roaring but seemingly few projects besides wooden decks ever completed. These were the same places he could be found when I needed to endure a condescending math homework tutorial, when my mother wanted to go over the latest blown-up credit card bill, or after he and my mother decided to go through with cashing out my college fund to finance suing the first builder of our McMansion.

I played the role of the scapegoat in a family bound by narcissistic rules, an emotional dumping ground for my parents' failures to achieve what they felt entitled to. Small requests or confrontations on either end typically ended in a bombardment of past transgressions and questions I never had answers to. My parents, both individually and together, would "confront" me until I was brought to tears. If I kept eye contact, I was being rude; if I looked at the floor, I was clearly lying. Then, I would be yelled at for being dramatic, emotional, and sensitive. Sometimes I would be told the conversation could continue when I had "calmed down," which really meant whenever I accepted defeat. Topics ranged from why I got a B on something to my tone not being grateful enough during a forced thank you. Ever the academic, I would spend hours analyzing what wrong move I might have made in the maze of invisible, ever-shifting rules, and mapping out plans in my mind for future confrontations. For all the hours I spent practicing conversations and body language, I couldn't see that the only rules that didn't change were my destiny to lose. The McMansion split into quadrants that I tiptoed through in hopes of becoming invisible. Now, I know that this concept of moving the goalposts ensures one can never make it to the finish line, and the only way I could make it stop was by leaving and becoming an adult.

My father and I had neutral to positive interactions a few times a month during my teenage years: A school night where I was allowed to silently watch one of his science fiction shows from the distant kitchen while he pretended not to notice me or a Saturday ride to the library in his two-seater sports car, the uselessness of a two-seater for a four-person family not lost on me even then.

One day near the end of high school, when the tensions in our household had nearly reached their breaking point, he handed me a blue, two-disc set of Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits. I held it in my hand trying to figure out what ulterior motive could be behind the gift and planned my facial expressions carefully. "I think you are old enough to appreciate this now," he said. "If you keep up with guitar, maybe you could combine it with your poetry." My suspicious rose. This was a direct contradiction to previous arguments about my desire to continue writing beyond homework assignments or being yelled at for practicing guitar on a school night. I copied the files of Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits onto my computer as I had with all of my CDs that I no longer carried around and told myself I would never listen to it. I hadn't liked Dylan's music before then, and the gift gave me even less reason to. I never did find out what drove my father to give me this music.

By the end of my orientation week at Carnegie Mellon University in 2006, my mother filed for divorce. It was more of a reactionary filing, though, as my father had asked for a divorce via sticky note, then took it back and essentially told my mother, "Nevermind." My father disappeared from my life for good my sophomore year of college. All that I know of him since then is from reading divorce paperwork and hearsay from other family members and the glimpses I caught at a recent funeral where we circled each other like magnets from opposite poles, never interacting.

In one of the many thick stacks of legal documents and court transcripts in my mother's possession, I read a scene where the judge asked my father if he would rather go to jail or pay child support. "I'd rather go to jail," he replied. New York state eventually garnished his wages, but even then, my father found loopholes and schemes to stop payments, delay checks, and renegotiate everything financial in

the case for the umpteenth time. I found my own form of support though: When my mother and I executed our secret move to an apartment the summer of 2007 while my father was at work, I spontaneously went through his entire record collection, taking all of the good ones, as well as the ones I thought he'd miss. I got the Blues Brothers soundtrack, The Eagles, and all of his Led Zeppelin. I even took the Bob Dylan records, doubling down on my vow not to bother listening to them. I never stepped foot in the house again, except to secretly return a set of tires to the McMansion's garage after I'd realized they did not go with my or my mother's car. Looking back, I wish I'd kept them and sold them— I could have used the food money.

On the road trip, with the Trader Joe's behind me, I sunk into the ripped leather bucket seat full of questions. I'd wanted to skip over the track, but I couldn't. So, I liked Bob Dylan now? Or, just one song? If I liked the music my father said I would, was he right about other things too? Was this more proof that I didn't even know myself, that I was a metaphor for failure and disappointment? My father had found a way to sneak mind tricks into an otherwise gutsy and empowering road trip, and I hated him for it.

Playing Dylan's "All I Really Want to Do" that second time around, my body tensed up, and buried feelings churned through me like a dizzying carnival ride. The infamous first line caught my attention. Maybe my father did know something about me, at least at one point. Maybe a few of our connections before the divorce were real, and not twisted in ulterior motives or long-term revenge plans. For the first time since our estrangement began, I allowed the tiniest part of me to be thankful for him. The gift of Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits that one strange afternoon was one of the last things he gave me willingly. After that, there was a small toolbox full of his cheapest screwdrivers, pliers, and nails for me to keep in my dorm room, and a safe that he bolted to the floor of my dorm room closet even though we all knew I had nothing to put in it. Though I daydream of erasing my father's presence from my past, deleting painful memories like the letter he sent to court announcing my twenty-first birthday and ineligibility for further child support when I had, in fact, only turned nineteen, I can't deny that he had an influence on the person I've become.

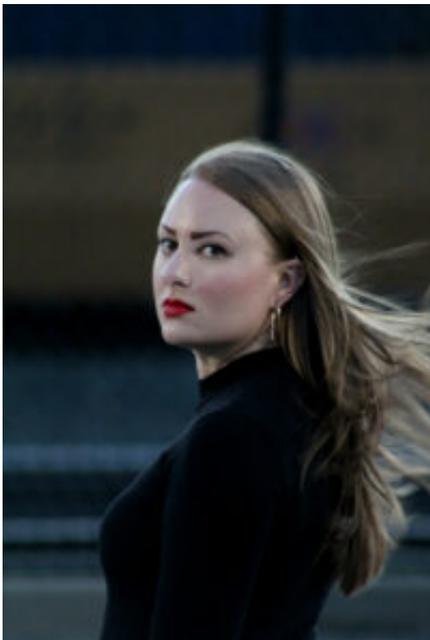
In early August 2013, I drove all night from San Francisco to Idaho to begin an MFA in Creative Writing at Boise State University with an unclear future and even fewer possessions. I felt certain of three things: that my five-year relationship was over, that moving to San Francisco was a sunk cost, and that I had seen a coyote staring at me on the right side of the road. The scene was familiar— an unexpectedly introspective road trip to a destination of a state I'd never thought I'd live in with the only human company coming from my music collection. I only hoped that this time, my father would not get wind of my travels and accuse my mother of funding my adventures with hidden money, as he ended up doing shortly after my move to California. Maybe this time, he could believe that I was an adult who sometimes had the urge to drive away and leave things behind.

It was three in the morning somewhere on Oregon's I-95, and I had no one I could call to keep me company and no towns to stop in as far as I could see. My mind was so numb and exhausted, all I could do was look at how bright the sky was. I pulled off the road as my eyelids grew heavier and realized I'd never seen the Milky Way so clearly until that night. It felt like it was just the coyote thirty minutes back and me left on earth. I thought about all of the times I had gone away, started over, or simply driven away. Finding the strength to pick up and start over all over again proved to me just how far I'd come from the shell of a teenager who first accepted the strange CD gift from the father she didn't trust. I found Dylan's Greatest Hits and pressed play as I curled up in the driver's seat to sleep. When the album ended, I would be ready for whatever life came next.

Music can hold enormous power in memories and experiences, transporting us instantly to an age, location, or person. What sonic joys, mysteries, disbelief, and clarity have you experienced? Identify

songs of influence in your life and explore them like variations on a theme, melding syntax and song structure, recalling the seriousness or levity that accompanies. Whether it's an account of when a specific song first entered your life, the process of learning to play a song, teaching someone a song, experiencing the same song in different places as it weaves through your life, unbelievable radio timing, sharing songs with those in need, tracking the passing down of songs, creative song analysis, music as politics, etc, I am interested in those ineffable moments and welcoming submissions of your own variations on a theme, as drawn from your life's soundtrack. Please email submissions to meganentropy@gmail.com and keep an eye out for others' [Variations](#).

("song" is a broad phrase: could be a pop song, a traditional tune, a symphony, commercial jingles, a hummed lullaby, 2nd grade recorder class horror stories, etc)



With no hometown to speak of, Jackie Sizemore comes from the Rustbelt, the South, and Tokyo. She received her MFA from Boise State University and BA from Carnegie Mellon University. Her prose has previously appeared in places such as Crab Orchard Review, Heavy Feather Review, Citron Review, Mojo/Mikrokosmos, and Eastern Iowa Review, and poetry has appeared in Noble / Gas Qtrly and Yes Poetry. Her lyric essay was listed as a Notable Essay in the Best American Essays 2018. She is currently seeking representation for her debut speculative novel. Read more at her website jackiesizemore.com and on Twitter @sizemorepov.