

Dylan's Kin in the Lowlands

232

[LUTGARD MUTSAERS]

'Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands' is on Bob Dylan's album *Blonde on Blonde* (1966). The lyrics incarnated in Dutch as 'Droeve Dame Van Het Laagland' on a CD of Dylan songs translated and sung by Ernst Jansz (1948), himself of undying Doe Maar fame. He shares a birthday with Dylan and has been fascinated by his work from the very beginning.

*Met je kwikzilveren mond
Als het missieieur begon
En je ogen als rook
En je gebed als een chanson [EJ]*

*With your mercury mouth
In the missionary times
Your eyes like smoke
And your prayers like rhymes [BD]*

The original tune, which ripples along in 6/8 time, is played on an acoustic guitar with hints of tambourine and organ and lasts for 12 minutes. Nine minutes into the song Bob's harmonica enters the sound spectrum. Any listener hearing this for the first time would be startled. The first notes are piercingly high and then fall back into a lower register of inhaling and exhaling. Youtube, which limits uploads to 10 minutes, includes the beginning of this solo - which is then suddenly cut off. The curious Youtuber is then obliged to go in search of what comes next: this is what it is like to experience Dylan in 2011. Elsewhere in cyberspace Ernst Jansz explains how he *as a singer* absorbs and experiences the secrets of Dylan's lyrics.

Bob Dylan's 70th birthday was worldwide news. In our part of the world too there was a tidal wave of tributes, nostalgia and stage performances which differed from North to South. In Berchem, for example, there was *Still Searching At 70*, announced as a 'spiritual' evening featuring Dylanologist Patrick Roefflaer, author of *Bob Dylan in de Studio* (2011), along with rising stars New Rising Sun. Radio 1 broadcast a moving tribute session live from the cultural centre "De Vooruit" in Ghent; among the contributors were Gabriel Rios, Bart Peeters, Thé



Bob Dylan

Bringing It All Back Home



Lau and Roland van Campenhout. With due apologies Bart Peeters ventured on 'Make You Feel My Love' (1997), the Dylan number that became a worldwide hit for the British singer Adele. According to Peeters, to Dylan fanatics 'Omdat Ik Van Je Hou' is blasphemy: only the master's original versions – His Master's Voice – are allowed into the canon. Paradox, the centre for contemporary music in Tilburg, hosted the *Bob Dylan 70 Jaar Tribute Festival*, featuring the doyen of Dutch pop journalism and Dylan expert Bert van de Kamp, author of *ABC Dylan* (2011). The evening was one of admiration blended with nostalgia and good stories.

The *Dylan-70-event* was held in Heerenveen, with look-alike Jacques Mees and protest singer Harry Loco. Friesland has its own Dylan tradition. In 2004/5 Ernst Langhout and Johan Keus brought out two CDs of *Dylan Yn It Frysk* (Dylan In Frisian). In 2010 another cd/dvd of Dylan songs in Frisian was released with contributions by eleven Frisian acts, including Langhout and Keus. The translations for this *Earbetoan oan Bob Dylan* (Tribute to Bob Dylan) were the work of writer Baukje Wyttsma and poet Harmen Wind, the high point being 'Roffel Op 'E Himeldoar' (Knockin' On Heaven's Door). So few people turned up for *Dylan-70*, that the organisers had to abandon further Dylan celebrations.

Bob Dylan, *Bringing It All Back Home*, Columbia Broadcasting Systems, 1965. Album Cover

Things went better in Groningen. A heavily attended “intellectual” happening took place at the film and debate centre Forumimages. Dylan biographer Sjoerd de Jong, who works for the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, gave a talk. Erik Bindervoet was there too. Together with Robbert-Jan Henkes he had translated Dylan into Standard Dutch, published in 2006 as *Snelweg 61 herbezocht, Bob Dylan Liedteksten 1962-1973* (Highway 61 Revisited, Bob Dylan Lyrics 1962-1973) and *Voor altijd jong, Bob Dylan Liedteksten 1974-2001* (Forever Young, Bob Dylan Lyrics 1974-2001) published in 2007. ‘Every syllable matches and the lyrics retain their original meaning’ according to the translators. The lyrics were transposed from one vernacular into the other with technical perfectionism. ‘Singers they obviously are not’, remarked Ernst Jansz when asked to comment. Lucky Fonz III, the up-and-coming bard who rediscovered Guido “The Flemish Bob Dylan” Belcanto for a Dutch audience, added his musical magic to the evening. Famous artists were conspicuously absent at the other tribute programmes in the Netherlands.

Lurking in the background



Guido Belcanto.
Photo by Daria Rogulska.

Almost half a century ago Bob Dylan was the fuse that ignited the powder keg of pop music. Thanks to Dylan, Flemish and Dutch folk movements rediscovered their regional traditions. Protest singers came and went. The marriage of culture and counter-culture ended up on the rocks. Those true artists who mined the same vein as Dylan survived, among them the Antwerp singer and all-round artist Wannes van de Velde (1937-2008). His experiences as a child during the World War II instilled in him the fire to rework Dylan’s ‘Masters of War’ and make it his own. Together with blues singer Roland van Campenhout he performed ‘Oorlogsgeleerden’ (on *Nomaden van de Muziek*, Nomads of Music, 1999), Wannes singing in his mother tongue, Roland in Dylan’s.

*Oorlogsgeleerden, genies van 't kanon
Ge bouwt de torpedo's en waterstofbom
Ge schuilt achter muren en achter papier
Maar ik ken al uw kuren, uw stalen manier [WvdV]*

*Come you masters of war, you that build all the guns
You that build the death planes, you that build the big bombs
You that hide behind walls, you that hide behind desks
I just want you to know I can see through your masks [BD]*

Van de Velde described the folk singers’ profession succinctly in his songlines: ‘here is a singer, his voice and his story, on his journey along the roads of language,’ (‘Hier Is Em Terug’ 2006). He knew Flemish folk music like the back of his hand, songs from the Antwerp pubs and docks and, by a marvellous coincidence, Andalusian gypsy music. Out of this musical background he created an intensely personal oeuvre, and not from any intention of becoming rich and famous. Such a profile, which fits organically from the cradle to the road leading on from it, is characteristic of the Dylan tradition which is a lot older than Bob. In ‘Ne Zanger Is Een Groep’ (1976) Van de Velde put it this way:

*Vertelt me nooit niet meer: ne zanger is iets enig
Want da's een leugen, dat is reklaam
Ne zanger is een groep, dat zing ik en dat meen ik
Een lieke zingt ge nooit of nooit allenig
Zonder al d' ander zou dat niet gaan*

*Never tell me again that a singer is on his own
For that's a lie, it's only an advertising sign
A singer is a group, that's what I sing and I mean it
Never ever do you sing a song alone
Without all the others, it wouldn't work out fine.*

Most of the music made by Belgian and Dutch singer-songwriters in the American folk and blues tradition would not have existed without Dylan. Even though artists are reluctant to talk about their influences and mentors out of fear of revealing themselves as imitators, many of them have Dylan lurking in the background. He hides in the sources of their inspiration, the length of the numbers, the (in)comprehensibility of the words, the freedom of expressing one's opinion, the criticism of the madness of the moment, the credibility of the person who sings. The idiosyncratic Dylan has always remained the same self-willed man, with an intuitive aversion to rigidity and predictability. Pop artists following in Dylan's wake sought out their own paths in the light of Dylan's revelations. With such a powerful model it is extremely difficult to step out of his shadow.

Musically speaking, a Dylan epigone is easily recognised. But what matters is what lies behind the notes, that coagulation of emotion and musical language, the power of expression, the will and the skill to bend the record industry and the media to one's own ends. That is why Dylan's love songs are just as important as his folk ballads and cryptic intellectual games. His symbolic B-side of love gave pop music the fragile emotions that suited the international zeitgeist better than the heavy timber of blues and country music. Dylan encouraged his followers to create self-liberating work. Not for Dylan's kin were shiny wrapping paper and ribbons to hide the great emptiness within; the Dylan-inspired type of singer-songwriter preferred the directness of a song, a voice, a sound that could lay bare heart and soul.

Serious music, and yet pop. Dylan's humour is not tainted by feeble parody or crude jokes. Even 'Rainy Day Women' (1966), renowned for the refrain line 'Everybody must get stoned' is not trying to be hilarious. 'In De Hemel Is Geen Dylan' (There Is No Dylan In Heaven, 2003) by De Nieuwe Snaar, a tune they composed to lyrics by Frank van der Linden, matches in closely with this creative balancing on the edge:

*Ik weet: de Boomssteenweg is geen Highway 61
Maar als ik weer de baan op moet, dan voel ik toch de drang
Om luidkeels mee te zingen met de kerel die verlangt
Naar een mooie Sad Eyed Lady – die bestaan ook in dit land*

*I know the Boomssteenweg is no Highway 61
But when I have to take that road, then I still feel the urge
To sing along and loudly with the guy who yearns
For a lovely Sad-Eyed Lady – we have them here as well.*

'Leven Na De Dood' (Life After Death, 1997), by the eminent Dutch comedian Freek de Jonge after Dylan's 'Death Is Not The End' (1988), is a doubtful case. It did get to the top of the hit parade, though. The lyrics are full of references to current events, and that doesn't work as well now as it did then. That doesn't really matter. But, the singer wants and expects to be funny. And he is undoubtedly funny. He is a master of comedy. However, this (timeless) passage is quite un-Dylanesquely lame:



De Nieuwe Snaar.
Photo by Marc Ras.

*Heb je je doodsangst overwonnen
Wordt het alle dagen feest
Dus vandaag maar vast begonnen
Voor je 't weet, ben je er geweest*

*Now overcome your mortal fears
Throw daily parties in your honour
Start catching up on your arrears
Before you know it, you're a goner*

Compare this to a fragment from the original:

*When you're standing at the crossroads
That you cannot comprehend
Just remember that death is not the end.*

Dylan's 'Death Is Not the End' is full of cities on fire, burning flesh, sinister visions. It might be called typical Dutch humour, poking fun at an image so apocalyptic.

Ever since his Dylan-inspired hit 'Ben Ik Te Min' (Am I Not Good Enough, 1967) the Eindhoven-based protest singer Herman van Loenhout (1946) aka

Armand has been known as 'The Dutch Bob Dylan'. He is perhaps a little too serious to be honoured as a prophet in his own country. With his guitar, hoarse voice and harmonica, his sound was clearly Dylan-inspired. The song has nonetheless become a Dutch classic, a folksong that deservedly finds its way into the repertoires of folksingers that consider Armand to be a prime mover in the Netherlands.

Ben ik te min?

Ben ik te min omdat je ouders meer poen hebben dan de mijne?

Ben ik te min?

Ben ik te min omdat je pa in een grotere kar rijdt dan de mijne?

Am I not good enough?

Am I not good enough because your folks have more dough than mine?

Am I not good enough?

Am I not good enough because you dad has a bigger crock than mine?

The contrast with the 'The Flemish Bob Dylan' couldn't be greater. It is unclear how Guido Belcanto came by that title. His favourite stylistic devices are bizarre exaggerations and crazy contrasts, all of which make you die laughing. 'Een Vrouw Zien Huilen' (Seeing A Woman Cry, 1990) is his very own 'Sad-Eyed Lady Of The Lowlands', utterly individual, instantly recognisable. This is where Belcanto's Dylan quality lies. He never became solely dependent on his model. His other ear is tuned to the French tradition of *chanson*, in this case to Jacques Brel's 'Voir Un Ami Pleurer' (To See A Friend Cry). Belcanto boasts to the point of absurdity about his dangerous hobbies and heroic deeds and then admits:

Maar als ik een vrouw zie huilen

is 't alsof mijn wereld vergaat

alsof er niets meer bestaat ... dan verdriet

als ik een vrouw zie huilen

dan krimp ik in elkaar, is het eind der wereld daar

een vrouw zien huilen kan ik niet

But when I see a woman cry

It's as if my world founders

It's as if there's nothing but sadness, I swear

When I see a woman cry

I cringe, the end is nigh

Seeing a woman cry is something I can't bear

Many have followed in Dylan's footsteps, in a multiplicity of ways. Because the Low Countries' artists need to find some creative way of compensating for the fact that we have no Bryan Ferry (Roxy Music) who uses covers on his CD *Dylan-esque* (2007) and gets away with it, since what he made wasn't really a Dylan cover CD but an authentic Bryan Ferry CD. Apart from the routine buskers on café terraces making a few cents with 'Blowin' In The Wind' and 'The Times They Are A-Changin'', what concerns us here is finding out 'where Dylan is'. We won't find the answer to this in any *Dylan Encyclopaedia*, *Rough Guide To Dylan* or *Dylan Companion*.

On the 24th of September 2011 the North Nederlands Dylan Festival was held in the former communist heartland of Oost-Groningen in the tiny village of Mussel, on the shores of the Lindenmeer, along the Ondersteveenweg. The event was in the atmosphere of the mid-nineteen-sixties. It was organised at Café De Mussel on the Musselweg where Siep Schoenmaker, who translates Dylan into Groningen dialect, and Alex Vissering, who performs Siep's work, set about assembling an excellent international line-up. In the Groningen countryside, of all places. Why? Bob Dylan went cycling there - not exactly there, but close enough. Bill Mensema fanned the persistent flames of rumour with his novel *Fietsen met Bob Dylan* (Cycling With Bob Dylan, 2008).

But first, the facts. Dylan played at the Martinihal in Groningen on 18 March 1995. This resulted in the release of a bootleg double CD. About that time Bob Dylan was supposedly seen drinking a cup of coffee at the bar of Café 't Zielhoes [Sailhouse] in Noordpolderzijl in the district of Usquert in the very north of Groningen Province, on the shores of the Waddensee, level with the deserted island of Rottumerplaat. So not in the middle of, but on the very edge of nowhere. It is rumoured that Dylan cycled all the way to 't Zielhoes on the recommendation of an acquaintance who thought that Dylan would feel at home in the landscape. The bike is the weakest link: an American on a bike, Bob's delicate thinness, the long distance in wind and weather. The key witness, the café owner, has provided verbal confirmation. He wasn't overawed by such an important visitor. His only concern was making sure the bill was paid.

Ronald Ohlsen (1968), a published poet who lives in Groningen City, has embraced the legend. Ohlsen belongs to the 1980s generation who rediscovered Dylan from a purely musical perspective, without the idealistic baggage of the 1960s. Following his lecture on Dylan at Groningen University he was approached by the lads from Mussel who persuaded him to do a warm-up evening for their festival. Ohlsen is no average Dylanologist. He performed with the "De Rollende Donder Revue" (The Rolling Thunder Review, a title taken from Dylan) in Vera, Groningen's Valhalla of pop. For that occasion he wrote 'Robert Zimmerman-blues', a lyric not a poem, just as Dylan is wont to write lyrics not poems. Here's a fragment:

*Ik heb de Robert Zimmerman-blues
Ik schrijf een evangelie
'k Ben Judas niet maar ken hem wel
Hij vroeg om peterselie*

*I've got the Robert Zimmerman blues
I'm writing a gospel, really
I'm no Judas but I do know him
He asked for parsley*

Now back to Ernst Jansz, who kicked off this chapter with his much acclaimed Dylan translations. In 2010 Jansz released the CD *Dromen van Johanna* (after Dylan's 'Visions of Johanna', 1966), consisting of his own translations/adaptations of twelve Dylan songs, mostly about love. A book, a DVD and a theatre programme completed the account of his research into the language of words and sounds. In keeping with the spirit of the master, Jansz added autobiographical elements.



'Voor Ramona' ('To Ramona', 1964) leads the listener soundwise to Jansz's colonial-Indonesian family background, in which he developed an active interest in later life. In 1960 'Ramona' (an American song that dates from 1927) was a huge hit for The Blue Diamonds, two brothers born in colonial-Indonesia who were the first superstars of Dutch pop music. Jansz is the latest who has a comparable family background, although he himself was born in Amsterdam. He embedded his beautifully frayed voice in the sound of ukuleles and Hawaiian guitars. Via Dylan Jansz has managed to create his most nostalgic colonial-Indonesian-sounding music to date.

Jansz's Dylan interpretations were the artistic climax of the Mussel event. The guitarist Luigi Catuogno, well known for his *Dylan Suite* (1999), came over from Italy. The Englishman Danny Bryant played 'Girl From The North Country' (1963), naturally. Of course The New Fools from Achel in Belgium were there too, six men dressed in black from head to toe: arguably the best Dylan tribute band in Europe. And following the disappointment at Heerenveen, who should be there but look-alike Jacques Mees, runner-up in the Dylan Cover Competition on dylanradio.com, along with singing buccaneer Harry Loco from the village of Vries in Groningen province.

Ernst Jansz and
The New Fools, Flemish Dylan
Coverband, at Dylan Festival
in Mussel.
Photo by Daniël Schoenmaker.

Where wonders do belong

To conclude on a personal note from this jubilee year: 'The Ballad Of Frankie Lee And Judas Priest' on *John Wesley Harding* (1967) is a marathon of brilliant words and phrases in a story that was way over my head back then. Following his wake-up-call harmonica solo Dylan returns to the song: 'Well, the moral of the story, the moral of this song, is simply that one should never be, where one does not belong.' Oops, and for forty-five years I've been singing 'where wonders not belong', in tune with the world-view that Dylan had handed on to his eager admirers. Bobdylan.com helped this girl from the North Country back into business. ■

NOTE

The legend of Dylan in Noordpolderzijl was checked by journalist Herman Sandman, who asked Bob Dylan himself by e-mail, and received a reply. As guest radio columnist, he reported his findings at VPRO's 3voor12 Groningen on 7 September 2009.

Translated by Alison Mouthaan