

## by Steve Goldberg

Man is constantly demonstrating his ability to miss the point. His religions channel his passions into an adulation of the messenger at the expense of the message. Jesus would have been appalled to learn that men were worshipping *him*, while they relegate love to the category of four-letter words. It is a miracle that the message of the Ten Commandments did not spawn a religion worshipping the rocks on which they were written.

This penchant also occurs on the seemingly less formidable level of art. The artist's attempt to find meaning is lost in a pile of sweatshirts bearing his name. And so it is, or will be, with Bob Dylan.

It is Dylan's poetry, not Dylan, which gives understanding. Even if Dylan were a charlatan — so what? Possibly he has no idea of what he is really saying. Even one who is absurd enough to think that substantive truth can be reached by rational means must know that Socrates found that poetry is inspiration, and that the poet is not able to "explain" his meaning. Shakespeare may have been putting us all on, yet that does not diminish *Hamlet's* beauty.

Dylan, like Blake, sees a universe without paradox and without contradiction. A new kind of acid has replaced the acidity of cynicism which pervaded his first four (quite bad) albums. He has found that art and social protest really have nothing much to do with each other. Perhaps theirs is an element of disillusionment; after all, those cretins with swastikas who are so upset at the prospect of having a Negro neighbor are all examples of the glorious working man. Primarily, however, Dylan is talking about

the universe and that's a subject which is plenty big enough for one lifetime.

Dylan is unquestionably right when he says that *Like a Rolling Stone* is his best song. When he tells the debutant to pawn her diamond ring, he is not merely telling her to give up middle-class ways. He is not just talking about a new set of values of a more altruistic nature. That he leaves to the New Left just as Eliot could have left it to the old left. He is saying that there is something else:

You used to be so amused  
At Napoleon in rags and the  
language that he used  
Go to him now, he calls you,  
you can't refuse  
When you got nothing, you got  
nothing to lose,  
You're invisible now, you got  
no secrets  
To conceal.

Likewise, when Dylan says in *It's Alright Ma: "I've got nothing, Ma, to live up to"*, he is not (as most critics have said) saying "Ma, you didn't give me any values." That was the point being made by the mediocre beat poets of the fifties who found their way into the void, but could not find a new cosmology to fill it. Basically, Dylan is saying "It's alright, Ma, I don't *have* to live up to anything."

Baby Blue understands, and so "it" — what used to be — is all over now:

Leave your stepping stones  
behind, something calls for  
you  
Forget the dead you left, they  
will not follow you  
The vagabond who's rapping

at your door  
Is standing in the clothes that  
you once wore  
Strike another match, go start  
anew  
And it's all over now, baby  
blue.

And so it is with Dylan's last three albums. What is the new truth of the universe that makes previous values obsolete? Listen to Dylan. It has something to do with love. No one can say the truth; one must speak around it. Sometimes Dylan fails, but often he comes terrifyingly close. He described its beauty in his call to his muse, *Mr. Tambourine Man*, which may not be *Kubla Khan*, but its idea and its inspiration are the same.

One tends to recoil when he hears an "I don't know much about art, but I know what I like" attitude expressed. Certainly one hopes for some sort of standards, standards grounded in the communication of meaning — not the procrustean prejudices of some soulless English professor. Yet art is an attempt to give form to apparent chaos, an effort to catch the tune of the universe. So, such an attitude, hedonistic as it may seem, is necessary if one is to find in art more than a new fashion to follow.

What I'm getting at is this: Dylan, like Blake and Shakespeare, helps me to hear that tune — to empathize with the essence of the universe. If you want to call this essence "God" — a God that is, not a God that does — I won't bitch. And if you think Dylan is a phoney hipster grinding out vernacular nonsense, well that's all right too. Pay your drummer and take your choice.