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Rock ‘n Roll meets Folk Revival and goes political: from Bob Dylan goes electric to Woodstock (1965-1969).

The Sixties were a decade of deep changes in the history of the United States. The roots of these changes arose in the decade before, when a modern mass and consumer society was developing. These changes in society had a reflection in many ways, but interesting is how these social developments affected music, especially popular music. In the 50es rock and roll was the focal point to which all fears were directed from the white middle class. A general moral decline was thought to be related to that kind of music, and with it free sexuality, violence and delinquency as well. The models given by the media and also by the cultural sphere, and here to remember is the Beat Generation, were all in the pursuit of moral corruption of customs. But in the end of the 50s rock and roll became more mainstream, less identified with the rebellious, thanks to TV programs which showed and promoted rock and roll as white middle class music. Consequently, public taste and cultural values changed profoundly. As Reebee Garofalo, in his book *Rockin' Out. Popular Music in the United States*, points out:

What was perhaps most frustrating to society's custodians of good taste and the established powers of the music industry was the fact that they could not understand how rock 'n' roll had gathered such momentum in the first place. For this, they had no one to blame but themselves. By initially ignoring the music in the hope that it was a passing fad, they had allowed it to gain a following that could be not turned around.¹

At dawn of the Sixties, these presuppositions gave rise to a gestation period, which was about to explode very soon:

The conservative hegemony and control that rock 'n' rolls challenged implicitly in the 1950s gave way to open social and political upheaval in the 1960s.²

A revolution was in the air, young people felt that a society rotten to the core needed to be changed. And, in fact, traditions and stability were about to degenerate. The baby-boomers were turning in their teenagers, and besides a higher education was more widespread and accessible to people of lower classes, because high education was thought to be necessary for the country to be competitive worldwide (and in the constant challenge with the Soviet Bloc) and also the media were important to spread knowledge and fads as seen before. In this context, a new political awareness was giving birth to new social and political movements, which were profoundly changing the social settings of the nation, because youngest people, in a way, participated by that time more and more at the rethinking of that nation. The main matters which shook the country were civil rights, anti-Vietnam War, more power for black

¹ Reebee Garofalo, *Rockin' Out. Popular Music In The USA* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999), 171.

² *Ibidem*, 183.

people, students and young people more conscious and involved in social issues, women's liberation and the counterculture. Therefore, rock music became the anthem of this revolution:

[...] rock [...] was an integral part of popular reform by the late sixties. In the atmosphere of youthful tribalism, rock was the way to communicate when mere words failed.³

Through the media people came in contact with the concept of "art" and "artist" and their free way of life. According to what David R. Shumway writes in his essay *Bob Dylan as a cultural icon*:

The public remained suspicious that artists were, like "beatniks," lazy, slovenly radicals who refused "normal" work and family life. But they were also fascinated by the freedom these very characteristics seemed to entail, and, increasingly, by the strange new work such artists produced.⁴

It is a period in which radicalism and art went hand in hand. Even if the time between the 1958 and the 1963 (a year later The Beatles will come to the United States, turning upside down the music scene) was marked from silence, (in which not so much rock 'n roll music was produced and in fact this period was known as a dead period, "an unfortunate interval between rock & roll and rock"⁵), which by the way was hiding a sort of rumbling, since from the mid-Sixties music became an instrument of political protest. Both the birth of new media and racial settings and civil rights changed the way music was perceived. Performers became songwriters, and very often the songs, which they wrote, were protest songs, strongly influenced by the tradition of the American popular song and R&B.

The new decade of music was strongly touched by "three characteristics: rebellion, withdrawal and escape."⁶ This period was also labeled by a strong ideology, a rock ideology

founded in an idealized Romanticism with a heavy stress on personal expression, and in a socio-political awareness that led to radical activism on race, class, or gender issues, or against the war in Vietnam.⁷

In this entire context rock music became of primary importance.

At that period, elite culture and mass culture were on the way to be identified in each other even more. Popular music, especially rock and roll, was still considered on a lower level, the music for the masses, although folk music was less undervalued. Rock music was more about

³ Herbert Ira London, *Closing The Circle. A Cultural History of the Rock Revolution* (Chicago: Nelson – Hall, 1984), 115.

⁴ David R. Shumway, "Bob Dylan as a cultural icon" in *The Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan*, ed. Kevin J. H. Dettmar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 110.

⁵ David Hatch and Stephen Millward, *From Blues to rock: an analytical history of pop music* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 87.

⁶ Herbert Ira London, 78.

⁷ Robynn Stillwell, "Music of the youth revolution: rock through the 1960s" in *The Cambridge history of twentieth-century Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook and Anthony Pople (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 441.

rebellion to preconceived ethical rules, folk music was more dedicated to political denounce. Folk singers used to recreate tradition, taking their song from the tradition, in order to speak for other people, and report events, which had a social significance. Although there were also few others first of him, Bob Dylan was one of the first folksingers, who wrote his own songs. Therefore rock music and folk music were antagonists, the former was the music of the streets, and the latter was intended to be more elitist. But both groups together were challenging the old guard. The world of folk musicians was a utopian one, they believed in a society where people were considered completely good and the institutions rotten to the core, and consequently people were affected by them. To name a few of them, the artists who were doing folk music at that time were Judy Collins, the Kingstone Trio, the Brothers Four, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan (as said before), the Limelitters, the New Christy Minstrels, Peter, Paul and Mary. Of course, they were all influenced by Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie, who belonged to the previous generation of American folk singer-songwriters. But what differentiated the youngest group was their desire to be more commercialized, and to do so, of course, they had to be more commercial, even if they still wanted to be faithful to their own beliefs. Inevitably, compromises were about to follow. As Herbert Ira London in his book *Closing the circle. A Cultural History of the Rock Revolution* argues:

Folk *was* revolutionary in its content, but it omitted the significant feature of this rock revolution: the experience of uninhibited movement. It is movement, literally and figuratively, on which revolutions depend, and it was a lack of movement that ultimately vitiated folk music.⁸

Bob Dylan (real name Robert Zimmerman) moved to New York City from Hidding, Minnesota in 1961 and there it began his career as a singer-songwriter. He hitchhiked to New York to visit his idol Woody Guthrie, who lied in a psychiatric hospital, because he suffered from Huntington's disease⁹. Thereafter he joined the folk artists' circle in the Greenwich Village, a neighborhood in the west side of Lower Manhattan known as the birthplace of the Beat movement, which was attended by artists and bohemians. He quickly became prominent on the scene of the folk music, both for his lyrics and for his vocal style, marked from a hoarse voice, and a way of singing similar to the "talking blues", which he inherited by Woody Guthrie. In fact, he is known as the <<son>> of Woody Guthrie. He tried to emulate him from the very beginning writing songs where he criticized the society in a very direct and comprehensible way. The personal style of the songs of Woody Guthrie (an American singer-

⁸ Herbert Ira London, 78.

⁹ Source: Wikipedia. "Woodie Guthrie." Accessed October 09, 2011
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woody_Guthrie#1950s_and_1960s

songwriter and guitarist, who started his career mainly in the 40s), his comments on the society and lyrics taken from his personal life were a model for the songs of Bob Dylan. Indeed, he defined Woody Guthrie as an inspirational figure, because he was a radical, and that is the reason why he wanted to sing: to be a radical.

Even though this dichotomy of considering folk singers as artists and the components of rock bands as musicians, with Dylan all that seems to come together. Famous is Dylan's show at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965, when he and the Paul Butterfield Blues Band appeared playing with electric instruments. People were shocked and began to boo at him feeling betrayed, folk music fans called him "sellout", because as Stillwell claimed "Folk was supposed to be acoustic, preferably played by one person, the singer-songwriter, so that the connection between performer and audience was transparent, unmediated."¹⁰ Afterwards Dylan toured through Britain with The Band (known previously as the Hawks, and originally from Canada, except for one of them, Levon Helm, who was from Arkansas). That shift of Dylan from an acoustic guitar to an electric one, made him the revolutionary who mixed "the style of folk protest to the iconoclasm of rock action."¹¹ Evidently Dylan was very much attentive to what was happening in the popular music scene, in fact being interviewed he pointed out:

We were driving though Colorado... we had the radio on and eight of the Top Ten songs were Beatles songs... They were doing things nobody was doing. Their chords were outrageous, just outrageous, and their harmonies made it all valid... Everybody else thought they were for the teenyboppers, that they were gonna pass right away. But it was obvious to me that they had staying power. I knew they were pointing the direction music had to go... in my head, the Beatles were *it*.¹²

Once Dylan heard the Beatles doing their music, he understood that the future of music was rock:

When Dylan picked up an electric guitar, folk music died as an influential musical form. In fact, Dylan said about rock, "In that music is the only true, valid death you can feel today off a record player."¹³

At least, the only way to be more commercialized was doing music with other musicians, or anyway, he felt tired to play alone, because he felt like everything was too sure (he was by the time already a star and had a large number of fans) and he wanted to have experience of something new. His thoughts about rock music are reported in an interview to him taken by

¹⁰ Robynn Stillwell, 439

¹¹ Herbert Ira London, 78

¹² David Hatch and Stephen Millward, 112

¹³ Herbert Ira London, 77

Nora Ephron and Susan Edminston, published in the book *The Age of Rock. Sights and Sounds of the American Cultural Revolution* edited by Jonathan Eisen:

I'll give you a comparison. [...] Rudy Vallee being popular. What kind of people could have dug him? [...] If you want to find out about those times [Rudy Vallee was active from 1924 and he was a singer and actor - - Ed.] and you listen to his music you're not going to find out anything about the times. [...] If you want to find out anything that's happening now, you have to listen to the music. I don't mean the words [...]. The words are not really gonna tell it, not really. You gotta listen to the Stapes Singers, Smokey and the Miracles, Martha and the Vandellas. That's scary to a lot of people. It's sex that's involved. It's not hidden. It's real. You can overdo it. It's not only sex, it's a whole beautiful feeling.¹⁴

Folk music was supposed to be played from one person and he would not be able to play that powerful music the Beatles did by himself, at least not alone. Dylan himself said in the interview mentioned above about doing folk music with electric instruments that:

It's very complicated to play with electricity. You play with other people. Most people don't like to work with other people, it's more difficult. It takes a lot. Most people who don't like rock and roll can't relate to other people.¹⁵

The choice to introduce electric instrumentation demonstrates Dylan's interest in experimentation:

By continuing to use folk sources, here, especially, blues, but transformed into rock & roll, Dylan did not invent a new genre, "folk rock," a term which he always rejected, but rather a distinctive sound that was at that moment his alone.¹⁶

Indeed, Dylan called himself "a trapeze artist"¹⁷ to stress the fact that he liked very much to experiment with music, but that he considered himself neither a poet nor an icon, like the press and the public seemed to depict him. The public, who got used to listen to popular music and disengaged lyrics, responded well to this new kind of more engaged songs, because the time was ripe in a way. But Dylan did not want to be an icon to them. In his song, "Like a Rolling Stone", he criticized this kind of approach to him, that he did not like that much. The song was released in 1965 in the album "Highway 61 Revisited":

'Like a Rolling Stone,' was a genuine pop hit, making it to number 2. Greil Marcus, who has written an entire book on this record, finds virtually all of rock & roll summed up in its six-plus minutes, yet he also insists that it was immediately recognized as something utterly new.¹⁸

¹⁴Nora Ephron and Susan Edminston, "Bob Dylan Interview" in *The Age of Rock. Sights and Sounds of the American Cultural Revolution*, ed. Jonathan Eisen (New York: Random House, Inc., 1970), 70.

¹⁵Ibidem, 64

¹⁶David R. Shumway, 115

¹⁷Nora Ephron and Susan Edminston, 65

¹⁸David R. Shumway, 115

Besides, the song is also known for this particular organ riff. There were a lot of problems at the beginning to release it because it was too long. And because of this, radios were reluctant to play it, but in the end, the song reached number two of the US chart and became a worldwide hit. It expresses a heavy resentment. The song addressee is Miss Lonely¹⁹, a person who is making a lot of experiences, detached from the world of the adults, collecting everything which life can offer, but in the end this freedom of leaving everything behind made her feel alone. This is a kind of provocation to the middle-class children, in fact he wanted to show the other face of the 60s youth and he criticized the fact that he was a sort of icon to these young people, only because he embodied the myth of the creative genius, the man without ties, completely free, totally self reliant and unique:

But many have felt that the song's addressee is paradoxically also Dylan himself. He's the one who should know how it feels "To be on your own / With no direction home / ... like a rolling stone." Muddy Waters and Hank Williams had both written about rolling stones, and Jack Kerouac and the Beats had styled themselves as such even if they hadn't used these words. The words seem to fit Dylan so well that two works about him have been "No Direction Home."²⁰

Dylan's lyrics are surely innovative in the sense that he gave "seriousness"²¹ to the popular songs, since before him they were concentrated on the music and not on the sense or content of the lyrics. In fact, speaking about folk songs, he argued that "folk music is the only music where it isn't simple. It's never been simple. It's weird, man, full of legend, myth, Bible and ghosts."²²

¹⁹ "You've gone to the finest school all right, Miss Lonely
But you know you only used to get juiced in it
And nobody has ever taught you how to live on the street
And now you find out you're gonna have to get used to it
You said you'd never compromise
With the mystery tramp, but now you realize
He's not selling any alibis
As you stare into the vacuum of his eyes
And ask him do you want to make a deal?
How does it feel
How does it feel
To be on your own
With no direction home
Like a complete unknown
Like a rolling stone?"

Source: "Bob Dylan." Accessed October 12, 2011. <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/like-a-rolling-stone>

²⁰ David R. Shumway, 116

²¹ Ibidem 117

²² Nora Ephron and Susan Edminston, 66

Moreover, his lyrics were not so much about politics, they were not meant to push directly masses to a revolution, but nonetheless they influenced the popular music in his changing. The influence of Bob Dylan on bands such as The Band, CSNY, The Byrds, stayed in the desire of being radical, to communicate their own dissent through the lyrics. Before Dylan only folk music was thought to be radical, after him and his rock turn, the way of doing rock & roll was profoundly changed. On the other hand, Dylan will remain unique in his way to be an artist, because he will experiment always new things in doing his music, and no one could be compared to him literally:

It was the newness, the strangeness that resisted classification, that distinguished Dylan from all the would-be Dylans the industry tried to market.²³

As it has been noted folk music influenced rock music (or popular music) and the way artist were involved in political and social matters. At the very beginning popular songs were about love, personal freedom and drugs. Then social comment and protest entered the lyrics and, in fact, as Robynn Stillwell argues in his essay *Music of the youth revolution: rock through the 1960s* :

In a way, it was Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind", and "For What It's Worth" by the group Buffalo Springfield, that made Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On?" and James Brown's "Say It Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud" viable in popular culture.²⁴

Therefore, as I argued earlier, the late Sixties were characterized by a radical dissent, especially among young people. The concerns of the so-called "counter-culture" were a dissent against the government, because of his involvement in the Vietnam War and the issue of the lack of civil rights for black people. Andy Bennet in his book *Remembering Woodstock* argues that:

A particular liaison between rock music and protest concerned the war in Vietnam. From the mid-60s a strong antiwar movement put an increasing pressure on the US Government to end the war and withdraw from the Vietnam.²⁵

The anti-Vietnam war movement was supported by many artists, demonstrating this both with their music and speaking in public against the war. An example of anti-war song was that of Country Joe MacDonald's "I-Feel-Like-I'm Fixin' -to-Die-Rag" ("and it's 1, 2, 3, what're we fighting for?/ don't ask me, I don't give a damn/next stop is Vietnam"²⁶). This song became

²³ David R. Shumway 119

²⁴ Robynn Stillwell, 439

²⁵ Andy Bennet, "Introduction" in *Remembering Woodstock*, ed. Andy Bennet (Aldershot, Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2007), xvi.

²⁶ "Country Joe's Place" Accessed 12 October, 2011. <http://www.countryjoe.com/feelmus.htm>

very famous, also because of the Woodstock film, and it embodied the spirit of that protest: people did not know what they were fighting for and they wanted to stop that violence which did not make sense at all, and songs became the prominent medium to communicate that sort of dissent. Furthermore, as it has been pointed out, also domestic politics was a topic for protest. The issue of civil rights was felt in the whole country and the music of black artists also took an even more radical vein during the 60es. At the festival of Woodstock Richie Havens, Sly Stone and Jimi Hendrix were the few black artists to appear. Popular is Jimi Hendrix's playing of the American national anthem *The Star Spangled Banner* and Richie Havens' spontaneous calling for *Freedom* (an improvised song, which became one of the anthems of the Woodstock festival). They used their performances at the festival, as well as other artists, to give key messages to those watching at them, and then also to those watching the film or who heard about the festival.

Rock music became the new language of the cultural revolution. As London points out:

In the mid-fifties, in what might be described as the first stage of rock, musical complexity was sacrificed for the sake of a new audience. In the late sixties – during the second stage – the music had a message of political and social consciousness that was intended to separate believers from nonbelievers.²⁷

In fact, rock music was not meant for the masses then, but to “educate” people, to radicalize them, the imperative was subverting things through culture. The fact is that this new language was not intended to explain anything, it was just a way to radicalize through shocking, and even if London in his book argues that “[p]resumably Dylan, the Rolling Stones, and the Jefferson Airplane [...] could radicalize vast audiences”²⁸, this new language was accessible only to the initiates, it was addressed to those who were already familiar with it. And those ones were mainly young people, who wanted to subvert a society, which has been handed down to them by the adults, and which they recognized as rotten. The enemy is the institution, which is at the basis of that society and every means to subvert it, is admitted. Rock is the means to express discontent: subversion

was interpreted as an assault on the expressions of the past, a past that for them [young people - Ed.], at least, was perceived as one colossal failure. The very audacity of vandalizing a university building, for example, was a symbolic way of tearing down social taboos and severing an association with those who had gone before.²⁹

The system is made of authority and tradition, things that are seen as limiting personal freedom of human beings. And those who longed for freedom, sought that in rock music, or

²⁷ Herbert Ira London, 103

²⁸ Ibidem, 104

²⁹ Ibidem, 105

eventually in drugs. Evidently, it was another way of escaping reality and a means to free the self from ties through high perception. And here the connection stands in the fact that through music one can invent new worlds, but also taking drugs, the mind free itself inventing new world physically in a way:

Although there is no direct relationship between drugs and music, it is also no coincidence that drugs played so prominent a role during this period of revolutionary cycle.³⁰

Behind this, there is a celebration of feeling against thinking, that the experience is much more effective in a continuous search for the self and in this context rock artists became more gurus than mere performers. But, as Herbert Ira London points out, this was not enough for those who really wanted a new world to be worth living and in fact:

for the “day tripper” there was only a “one-way ticket, yeh,” and no easy way to find salvation, despite the fact that the Beatles maintained “We Can Work It Out” and “With A Little Help from My Friends” you “can get by.” These were the years of “do your thing,” an expression of freedom from restraints and simultaneously a wish for a new world in which life can start afresh.³¹

The Festival of Woodstock, which took place in August 1969 in a small village in the Upstate New York, gathered all these feelings. It was the high point of the countercultural movement and represented that call for “peace and love” characterizing the period. Woodstock was both a symbol of arriving at some point in the history where things were about to change and also viewed as the swansong of all the stimuli collected during the decade. Indeed, Woodstock was seen as a moment in which thousand people were able to live pacifically and gave birth to the future rock events, which then turned to be disappointing (four months later at the Altamont festival, the violence exploded. As a result, this festival is known as the “alter ego” of Woodstock, because there all the illusions of the counterculture came to an end). That group of people (the audience and the acts) and the music formed an alternative community, desiring to be against the dominant culture. There was a spirit of community among them, it was “a time for love, joy, innocence, and experiment in living.”³² The festival was named after the city of Woodstock (even if it took place at the village of White Lake), as a symbol, because a lot of artists lived there, and also Bob Dylan, who was an icon for the countercultural movement:

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³⁰ Ibidem, 111

³¹ Ibidem, 113

³² Ibidem, 117

The place-name “Woodstock” was meant only to evoke cultural-revolutionary images of Dylan, whose home base is in that Hudson River village. Woodstock is where the Band hangs out and culture heroes congregate.³³

Dylan did not participate at Woodstock festival, in fact in 1966 he retired from the scene, but actually he was invited by Michael Lang, one of the organizers of the festival, as he told in his book *The Road To Woodstock*:

Bob Dacey [...] arranged a meeting for me with Bob Dylan at his home. Dylan’s song were important in my life, as they were in the lives of countless others. I just thought I’d tell him that we’d all love to see him there, unannounced, of course. [...] I knew he was uncomfortable with the mantle of “prophet” that he’d been tagged with by the press. He’d rarely played in public since 1966. Bob was the most important artist of our generation³⁴.

Still he was a symbol for those people, who were looking for a change in the country. Indeed, Woodstock itself became a symbol of a generation. It was not just the music, it was a large community of people, who coexisted pacifically and who wanted to demonstrate that peace on earth was not Utopian, but practicable:

This three-day fair was advertised as a concert with twenty-four groups performing, but in fact it was the largest tribal gathering of the century, expressing in the purest form the “new” generational views of communal living, hedonism, drug use, and rock music.³⁵

Michael Lang, in his book tells about his experience in organizing the festival and collects all the memories of all the people working at the it, acts and people who participated in planning it or simply went there:

There has been so much conflict over the past year, with violent confrontations occurring on college campuses, in urban ghettos, and at demonstrations across the country. At Woodstock we would focus our energy on peace, setting aside the onstage discussion of political issues to just groove on what might be possible. It was a chance to see throughout the sixties: that would be our political statement – proving that peace and understanding were possible and creating a testament to the value of the counterculture. It would be three days of peace and music.³⁶

Woodstock was so important, because it was the last festival, which gave space to folk music artists to play, in fact:

the significance of Woodstock [could be measured] in terms of its illustration of a transitional stage between the more politically oriented folk-influenced acoustic music of the first part of the 1960s and the heavily amplified commercially-oriented rock of the second part of the decade.

³³ Andrew Kopkind, “Woodstock Nation,” in *The Age of Rock 2: Sights and Sounds of the American Cultural Revolution*, ed. Jonathan Eisen (New York: Vintage, 1970), 313.

³⁴ Michael Lang and Holly George –Warren, *The Road To Woodstock* (New York: Ecco, 2009),145

³⁵ Herbert Ira London, 116

³⁶ Michael Lang and Holly George –Warren, 53.

[...] this would be the last “rock” festival where this would occur, future events being dominated by electric rock bands. In the case of Woodstock [...] the presence of so much acoustic music gave credence to the ‘back-to-land’ and political sensibilities of the audience.³⁷

As a result, the music market changed profoundly and it was no more possible to come back to folk acoustic music, but folk music, in his turn, influenced popular music so much that, for the first time since his birth, rock music was considered really authentic and it will remained a free instrument to denounce the social evils. Popular music was not only a marketing means by that time, but it became a prominent means for the artists to express their consciousness, and to try to recreate that “Brave new world”, which maybe became more a utopia than a reality, but which was still authentic and not a fad about to pass. It was a real revolution, which both turned popular music upside down, but also the society. As London points out rock music

is admittedly a mass cult, a music forever having to justify its validity. But it is also a music for all seasons.³⁸

³⁷ Andy Bennet, xx

³⁸ Hebert Ira London, 186

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