

Vocal Performance and Speech Intonation: Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone"

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This paper is drawn from a larger study of Bob Dylan's vocal style from 1960 to 1966. In that six-year span, I found that four distinctive sub-styles could be delineated.¹ The last of these, beginning in 1965 and continuing until Dylan's motorcycle accident in July 1966, is probably his most well-known sub-style. This sub-style seems to lie in a middle ground between song and speech, with a great deal of sliding pitch and rhythmically free text declamation. This is also the time period when Dylan had his greatest commercial and critical success, peaking with the release in July 1965 of "Like A Rolling Stone." In addition to the song's commercial success, a number of commentators have pointed to it as an artistic peak, many of them citing "Like A Rolling Stone" as the most important single performance of Dylan's 44-year (at the time of writing) recording career.

My intention here is to analyze a recorded performance of a single verse of one of Dylan's most popular songs, observing the ways in which intonation details relate to lyrics and performance. The analysis is used as source material for a close reading of the semantic, affective, and "playful" meanings of the performance. This reading is then compared with some published accounts of the song's reception.

For this analysis, I have drawn on the linguistic methodology formulated by Michael Halliday. Halliday has found speech intonation—which includes pitch movement, timbre, syllabic rhythm, and loudness—to be an integral part of English grammar and crucial to the transmission of certain kinds of meaning. Patterns of intonation are shared by the fluent speakers of a given language and the understanding of basic intonational gestures precedes words both in infant language acquisition and in

¹ A shorter version of this paper appeared as a chapter in my Master's thesis (1997), entitled "'One Who Sings with his Tongue on Fire': Change, Continuity and Meaning in Bob Dylan's Vocal Style, 1960-66" and in *Bob Dylan Anthology 2: 20 Years of Isis* (Barker 2005).

evolutionary brain development. That is, intonation is a lower brain function than word recognition, and thus develops as a perceptual tool much earlier. Speech intonation is a deeply rooted and powerfully meaningful aspect of human communication. It is plausible that a system so powerful in speech might have some bearing on the communication of meaning in sung performance. This is the premise by which I am applying Halliday's methods to this performance.

The musical object in question is the originally released studio recording of "Like A Rolling Stone," a performance that has generated much discussion among Dylan's commentators and fans. I begin with a short history of the song's reception among critics and fans, as well as some assessments of Dylan himself.

"Like A Rolling Stone" was recorded on June 16, 1965 and was released as a single on July 20th of the same year, later appearing on the album *Highway 61 Revisited*. It was an immediate success, eventually climbing to number two on the *Billboard* pop chart and number one on the *Cashbox* chart. The song was somewhat different from the top ten fare of the time, however. At a length of over six minutes (it was chopped for radio play) it was significantly longer than the two-and-a-half to three minute standard length then dominating pop radio, with a raucous guitar and organ-based arrangement and four verses of dense, rapid-fire verbiage. It is generally agreed upon by commentators that the lyrics—at least on the surface—recount the privileged upbringing and subsequent fall into desperate poverty an unnamed "Miss Lonely." The narrator's accusations and unflattering observations are couched in a series of declarative statements and questions, culminating after each verse in the famous refrain: "How does it feel / to be on your own / with no direction home / a complete unknown / like a rolling stone" (there are slight variations in the refrain from stanza to stanza). Perhaps the most strikingly unique aspect of the record is Dylan's vocal performance, with its use of nasal, sliding pitches and a speech-like, highly rhythmic declamatory style. Dylan later described, in somewhat stylized terms, the genesis of the song (to Jules Siegel, quoted in Scaduto 1973:244-5):

I wrote it as soon as I got back from England. It was ten pages long. It wasn't called anything, just a rhythm thing on paper—all about my steady hatred directed at some point that was honest. In the end it wasn't hatred. Revenge, that's a better word. It was telling someone they didn't know what it was all about, and they were lucky. I had never thought of it as a song, until one day I was at the piano, and on paper it was singing "How does it feel?" in a slow motion pace, in the utmost of slow motion. It was like swimming in lava. Hanging by their arms from a birch tree. Skipping,

kicking the tree, hitting a nail with your foot. Seeing someone in the pain they were bound to meet with. I wrote it. I didn't fail. It was straight.

Whether or not one chooses to take Dylan's comments at face value, they provide us with a sense of the artist's own perception of his creative process and the degree to which the endeavor succeeded. They also give us a glimpse into the visual and gestural correlatives of Dylan's sonic sense; he refers here to outward movement, directed towards a specific point. These metaphors, I suggest, are not arbitrary. They are in fact strongly indexed to the metaphorical constructs of much of the reception of "Like A Rolling Stone," as well as *to* the gestural aspects of Dylan's use of vocal pitch in the performance.

In addition to the popular acclaim accorded to Dylan's recording, a steady procession of commentators on Dylan's life and work have offered their own assessments. The larger works from which the following quotations are drawn include Dylan biographies, shorter articles, and more scholarly analytical works, in the cases of Mellers and Bowden (Scaduto 1973:245):

When you heard "Rolling Stone" back then it was like a cataclysm, like being taken to the edge of the abyss, drawn to some guillotine of experience. . . . [Dylan was] biting off a word, spitting out venom, spreading a virulent emotion, infecting the listener. . .

Patrick Humphries (Humphries and Bauldie 1991:57):

. . . steamrolling all that had gone before and spiraling onwards through outrageous rhymes and meter, lyrics flung like accusations, affronting yet compelling, that age-old fascination which lures unwary travelers right to the heart of darkness. . .

John Herdman (1982:14):

Rock bottom intensity of feeling. . . he tells us what he feels himself, he projects himself with eerie immediacy into the feelings of others, and in so doing he shows us what we feel too.

Paul Nelson (1966:107):

The definitive statement that both personal and artistic fulfillment must come, in the main, by being truly on one's own.

Betsy Bowden (1982:104):

. . . the absence of any personal pronouns [sic] sucks the listener into the song . . . the song's "you" gets thoroughly conquered in both sense and sound. . .

Wilfred Mellers (1985:140):

Although the words are dismissive, the music—with its jaunty repeated notes and eyebrow-arching rising thirds . . . is positive in total effect.

"Hugh Dunit" writing in *The Telegraph*, a Bob Dylan fan magazine (quoted in Williams 1991:153):

. . . his birth cry is the primal demon voice that whoops out the surging refrains of this song. . . each is a searing, vituperative taunt, designed to needle to the bone. But the tone of the words (as sung) and music is unmistakably joyous, celebratory. [Dylan] is exultant, free, on his own, ecstatic that he is as he once was, a complete unknown—unknown because unknowable.

While these assessments are rather broadly variant in tone and content, some recurring themes are discernible. I have grouped some salient metaphors and descriptors from the critical history of "Like A Rolling Stone" (including Dylan's own commentary) into five main thematic areas below:

Thematic area 1: Strong antagonism

"venom"
"dismissive"
"affronting"

Thematic area 2: Attractiveness

"sucks the listener in"
"lures unwary travelers"
"compelling"
siren song metaphor
"drawn to some guillotine of experience"

Thematic area 3: Positive message

"joyous . . . exultant . . . celebratory"
"personal and artistic fulfillment"

Thematic area 4: Projecting

Thrusting outward

"spitting out venom"
 "lyrics flung"
 "directed at some point"
 "whoops out"
 "spiraling onwards"

Thematic area 5: Sureness/effectiveness

Virtuosity

Intensity of feeling

Expressivity

"I wrote it. I didn't fail. It was straight"

Thematic area 1 parallels the mood and content of the lyrics as they appear on paper—a strong antagonism is conveyed through the constant, invasive questioning and damning judgments of the invisible first person (who may or may not be identified as Dylan himself). I would doubt, though, that the lyrics alone create such a strong mood of condemnation. Dylan's overall vocal timbre here is quite hard and nasal, the kind of vocal sound that might accompany a "tongue-lashing" by someone who clearly feels that they are in the right, perhaps directed at a child or some other person in a position of lesser power. Such a tone suits this classic monologic text, where the life history and inner thoughts of "you" are co-opted by the narrator who is himself invisible, that is, unnamed, not described: an inviolable, inscrutable disembodied voice.² Much of Dylan's expressive output around the time that "Like A Rolling Stone" was recorded displays a similar style of interpersonal communication.³

² Mikhail Bakhtin described monologism, as opposed to dialogism, in this way: "Monologism, at its extreme, denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights Monologue is finalized and deaf to the other's response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge in it any decisive force" (quoted in Brackett 1995:7). Although I would characterize the lyrics as monologic, the song in performance takes on a dialogic character by virtue of the many layers of sound and the complexities of mass commercial dissemination.

³ This kind of discursive control and venomous rhetorical skill can be observed in action in the classic film *Don't Look Back*, a documentary about Dylan's 1965 British tour immediately preceding the composition and recording of "Like A Rolling Stone." A sequence in the film captures a conversation between Dylan and "the science student," a young amateur journalist. Dylan immediately takes the student to task, questioning his inner motives, "turning around" the responses, toying with and effectively crushing his young victim with rhetoric. This seems to have been a favorite game at the time for Dylan and his cronies, a way of weeding out the unhip.

Thematic area 2 groups together references to the “attractiveness” of the performance, its power to draw the listener towards something that, when it is named at all, is vaguely dangerous or forbidding. Humphries seems to refer to the ancient Greek myth of the Sirens, who lured travelers towards destruction with an irresistible song. Scaduto, perhaps specifying the nature of the destruction, refers to a “guillotine of experience,” which might suggest that the listener experiences some irrevocable change in worldview once drawn into “the abyss.” These types of metaphors are difficult to reconcile with the sense of the lyrics as written, so it seems that this theme of “attractiveness” might be connected in some way with thematic area 5, which is concerned with virtuosic control. The “abyss” might be the potentiality of the listener herself being targeted for this kind of vitriol, while at the same time she is drawn to the source by the sheer mastery with which the antagonism is delivered.

Thematic area 3, headed by “positive message,” primarily comes from Paul Nelson’s 1966 essay, which suggests that all of the characters in “Like A Rolling Stone” are actually all in some way Dylan himself. This theme was taken up in the *Telegraph*, whose author connects the performance with a projection of Dylan as triumphantly breaking the chains of his safe, successful “folksinger” career in favor of some new, uncharted musical terrain in the rock milieu. Thus the “story” of the verses is just a scaffolding upon which to hang the exultant chorus. Rather than chalking up this interpretation to creative critique, though, I would suggest that this, too, is an impression based on performative factors more than lyrical sense. The band’s performance certainly helps matters along in this regard. There is nothing careful about the way the studio musicians barrel through the song, in spite of Al Kooper’s famous story (found in his autobiography, *Backstage Passes*) that this song marked the first time he ever played the organ. Dylan, too, contributes sloppily transcendent rhythm guitar and harmonica flourishes. The harmonic structure of the song itself can also be seen as a series of affirmations, with the verse consisting primarily of stepwise climbs from the I to the V chord, which is held until a satisfying return is made to the tonic I. The inevitable perfect cadences that begin each line of text are contradicted only once in the form, when a IV chord intervenes at the pre-chorus. This IV chord then reverses the movement of the previous lines, falling stepwise down to the I until the upward movement is restored with an extended II – IV – V climb. The choruses condense the stepwise climbs of the verses into terse I – IV – V statements that Dylan might have associated with the irony-free rock n’ roll aesthetics of “Twist and Shout” and “La Bamba.” I submit, then, that the commentators who associate “Like A

Rolling Stone" with joy, celebration, and liberation might be hearing these values primarily as embodied in the music, despite the fact that their critical faculties might impel them to look to the lyrics first.

Thematic area 4 might be fruitfully compared to thematic area 2 in that they both seem connected to gesture, space, movement, and energy. Whereas area 2 contains metaphors of attraction, area 4 refers to outward projection, ostensibly from the same source that attracts. The references to "spitting out" and "lyrics flung" directs our attention towards the mouth, and indeed Dylan referred to this song on a number of occasions as "vomitific." Could this thematic area, along with area 2, be related to various listeners' connections with the corporeality of the performance? We hear Dylan's mouth as he sings, but we can also envision his facial expression, perhaps his bodily movements as well. This we can deduce from the aural landscape of the recording, which gives us information about Dylan's vocal timbre, the speed of enunciation, and other details, but I believe that it is in the area of pitch that we will find the greatest correlation to gestural metaphors. As we will see, much of Dylan's vocal pitch use in "Like A Rolling Stone" finds him taking a syllable and describing a kind of arc, with a medium or short rise and a longer fall. This somewhat parallels the spatial path of an object thrown into the air. And since Dylan performs this arc repeatedly, sometimes several times in a single line of text, it follows that a listener might hear the words as "flung," or even "spiraling outwards," as each arc is succeeded by another.

Thematic area 5 contains metaphors of "sureness" and "effectiveness," connected with what might be thought of as virtuosic expressive control. Robert Walser has traced the eighteenth-century origins of the term "virtuoso," a word that is popularly thought of as referring to technical mastery. Walser points out that this technical mastery was always in the service of expressive and rhetorical control.⁴ The ways that this virtuosity is manifested in "Like A Rolling Stone" are twofold. As I hope to demonstrate, Dylan uses vocal pitch to emphasize the lyric sense—this may be interpreted as a rhetorical use of performative virtuosity. But his division of phrases does not always serve the "sense" of the discourse; on the contrary, his re-alignment of points of emphasis in the lyrics, again through pitch use, can be understood as *playful*. The virtuoso makes meaningful performances, but he also shows off what he can do. By sometimes obscuring meaning, he displays his mastery.

A close reading of Dylan's vocal performance in "Like A Rolling Stone" will allow for a better understanding of the metaphorical

⁴ See Walser 1993.

constructions that followed in its wake, in the form the critical responses recounted above. This close reading will consist mainly of an analysis of pitch use in the second verse and chorus based on Michael Halliday's linguistic method. First, though, a word on Halliday's method.

Through much of the history of linguistic inquiry, the written word has occupied a privileged place as an object of study. Languages are traditionally analyzed primarily in terms of their grammars; this reflects the popular belief that words and sentences constitute the essential part of human verbal communication. As such, spoken language is routinely transcribed to written form for analysis. Of course, popular knowledge also tells us that "*how* you say something is often as important as *what* you say." Every native speaker of English performs the language in some way that communicates things that the written word cannot. The scientific understanding of this "sonic sense" of speech, however, has developed slowly and fitfully until recent years.

As early as the 1930s, work began to be undertaken towards the understanding of speech intonation, the universe of sonic details that accompany every utterance. These details include large and small gradations in pitch, timbre, amplitude, and rhythm. The British linguist Michael Halliday has formulated a cogent system for understanding speech intonation in the context of a "functional" English grammar in his 1970 monograph *A Course in Spoken English: Intonation*, and his larger work from 1994, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. Since Halliday's work on the nature of speech has constituted one of the starting points for my own research, I include here a thumbnail explanation of his theory as it applies to the present work. The following short explanation is a paraphrase of some of the ideas put forth in Halliday's 1970 and 1994 publications, with an aim towards setting the stage for the analysis here.

Tonality

Intonation in English is organized in units Halliday calls *tone groups*. Halliday (1970: 3-4) says of the tone group:

The tone group is one unit of information, one "block" in the message that the speaker is communicating; and so it can be of any length. The particular meaning that the speaker wishes to convey may make it necessary to split a single clause into two or more tone groups, or to combine two or more clauses into one tone group.

The pattern by which tone groups are distributed throughout speech, called tonality, is crucial to the sense of an utterance. The speaker divides up the stream of spoken words into groups, and this reveals to the listener how to mentally organize the information. Almost always, tonality follows a predictable course, with tone groups basically corresponding to grammatical clauses. But when it is disrupted, as in Bob Dylan's 1965 studio performance of "Like A Rolling Stone," grammatical sense can be fundamentally altered.

Tonicity

Each tone group has a *tonic syllable*, a place of prominence that the speaker seeks to mark as most important and that carries the most pronounced pitch change. It often carries the burden of "new information" in the clause and, as such, the normative place of a tonic syllable is on the last word in a clause. Placement of the tonic syllable in places other than this is understood to be contrastive. The placement of tonic prominence is referred to as *tonicity*.

Tone

Halliday has identified five basic tones, or pitch contours, in English. Tone interacts with tonality (distribution of tone groups) and tonicity (placement of tonic prominence) to create meaning in English intonation. Following are the tones identified in Halliday's system:

Simple Tone Groups:

- tone 1 falling
- tone 2 high rising, or falling-rising (pointed)
- tone 3 low rising
- tone 4 falling-rising (rounded)
- tone 5 rising-falling (rounded)

I have transcribed the lyrics of the second verse and chorus of "Like A Rolling Stone" using an adaptation of Halliday's notation for speech intonation. The second verse is not dissimilar to the other three verses in style, but I chose it because it seemed to me to contain the widest variety of playful inflections and pitch gestures. The tones themselves (the numerals that begin each tone group) were chosen on the basis of their resemblance to

Dylan's use of sung pitch, as shown here. Each tone group is set off in a separate line of text and framed in double slash marks; syllables with tonic prominence are underlined, and rhythmic feet are divided by single slash marks.

- a) // 5 ah you // (rising, then falling, tone)
- b) // 1 gone // (falling tone)
- c) // 1 to the / finest //
- d) // 1 school //
- e) // 1 all //
- f) // 1 right //
- g) // 1'^miss / lonely / but you / know you / only / used to / get //
- h) // 5 juiced in / it //
- i) // 1 ^no/body's / ever / taught / you / how to / live out / on / the street //
- j) // 5 ^and / now you're / gonna / have to / get / used to //
- k) // 5 it //
- l) // 1 ^you / say you'd / never //
- m) // 1 compro / mise //
- n) // 1 with the / mystery / tramp but / now you //
- o) // 1 realize //
- p) // 1 he's not / selling / any //
- q) // 1 alibis //
- r) // 1 as you / stare in / to the / vacuum / of his / eyes //
- s) // 1 and say //
- t) // 1 do you / want to //
- u) // 1 make a / deal //
- v) // 1 how does it / feel //

- w) // 1 how does it / feel //
- x) // 1 to be / on your / own //
- y) // 1 ^with / no di / rection / home //
- z) // 2 a com / plete un / known //
- aa) // 2 like a / rolling / stone //

Below I have transcribed the same verse and chorus "grammatically," using line breaks to mark off likely clause divisions:

ah you gone to the finest school all right miss lonely
 but you know you only used to get juiced in it
 nobody's ever taught you how to live out on the street
 and now you're gonna have to get used to it
 you say 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 say "Do you want to make a deal?"
 How does it feel?
 How does it feel to be on your own
 with no direction home
 a complete unknown
 like a rolling stone?

The verse begins with a tone 5 (line a). This being a tone group unto itself, it would be plausible to refer to this speech function as an initiating call; tone 5, in this case, has a meaning of "insistence." This *is* the second verse, after all, which can be thought of as constituting an expansion of the ideas begun in the first. Thus the highly tonicized first pitch gesture of this verse might be interpreted as a kind of fanfare; musicologist Philip Tagg characterizes such strong upward pitch sweeps as "a call to attention and action, a strong movement upward and outwards . . . energetic and heroic" (Tagg 1979:14).

What follows is a rapid-fire series of Tone 1s. The use of the Tone 1 pitch fall here is unremarkable in itself, but it is the *tonicity* characteristics that are unusual here. The listener is bombarded with a series of tonicized words (tonic prominence is used in normal speech as a pointer to the *new* information in an utterance) and Dylan gives tonic prominence to nearly every word in the first part of the first line. This overloading of new information pointers renders the text as forceful and intrusive upon the listener. There is a sense of an intoxicating sensory overload.

Right away a general non-alignment of tone groups as sung with the grammar of the written lyric is evident. This manifests itself in the distribution of tone groups in many different places within the grammatical clause, as well as the placement of tonic prominence on syllables other than the last lexical item in the clause. In tone groups e) and f) this unusual, seemingly indiscriminate use of tonality breaks up the cohesion of the phrase “all right,” a phrase that has become fused, or indivisible, through popular use. The phrase is rendered contrastive to its usual meaning and marks the word “all” as a piece of new information. This would force the clichéd phrase to be processed in terms of its actual meaning, rather than as a purely “textual” conjunctive phrase, which it has become in popular usage. Thus the listener hears “all right” as an emphatic confirmation of the text immediately preceding. This technique seeks to renew the cliché, something that Dylan has done lexically in other songs by substituting unexpected words in common phrases.⁵

It would be grammatically plausible to segment the first line of this verse into two clauses as follows:

ah you gone to the finest school all right miss lonely
but you know you only used to get juiced in it

The second clause would usually be distributed over one tone group. This does not happen here, though not because of the overloading of tone groups that occurred in the first clause. Instead, the last part of the first clause (“miss lonely”) is included in the second clause’s tone group, which itself cuts off at “get,” rather than being completed with “juiced in it.” Thus the normative placement of the tone group on the clause is shifted backward by one phrase. This has the effect of presenting a grammatically incoherent group of words as a single package of information. This clouds the meaning of the clause somewhat, but perhaps more importantly it constitutes a poetic strike against grammar, at least as it appears in straight written narrative. Clearly Dylan, like Chuck Berry and others before him, is reveling in his virtuosic master of the medium of sung text.

The next couple of lines contain relatively little in the way of pitch playfulness, even though symmetry would suggest that the pitch falls should continue at the same rate. Dylan, however, refuses to do the expected. When the chorus begins, tonic syllables seem to be in their proper places. But Dylan throws in a few more curveballs. Curiously, the last two lines are sung in contours similar to tone 2. This would seem to introduce a mood of

⁵ See Ricks 1987.

questioning—tone 2 most often indicates uncertainty. But this coincides musically with the melodic resolution to the tonic, or home note, so the overall effect is that of closure.

Close reading of the vocal performance of a song, as I have attempted here, can yield a good deal of information about how meaning is handled beyond the lexical and grammatical levels of the lyrics. In the case of the second verse of "Like A Rolling Stone," these prosodic details can be seen in the context of that song's reception; intonational play and emphasis in the performance might be connected to perceptions of virtuosic expressive control, a sense of "expressivity" or "intensity of feeling," and gestural metaphors such as "flung" and "spiralling outwards." On the other hand, certain aspects of reception can be more precisely connected to other facets of the musical object: a sense of strong antagonism might be traced mainly to the lyrics, while a feeling of celebration and joy may be connected to the general raucousness and energy of the band's performance.

Though I am certain that pitch in sung language does hold meaning in a significantly patterned way, I am also aware that singing is not speech, and other factors do enter the semantic and affective landscape of musical expression. Nonetheless, a look at Dylan's use of pitch in this song, through the lens of linguistic speech intonation, goes a long way toward explaining the precise nature of Dylan's communication of meaning in sung performance. One need only observe the many gestural and metaphorical correlations between the linguistic aspects of the performance and the effects of that performance (as recounted in the reception history) on listeners. A certain thoroughgoing nature of Dylan's aesthetic is suggested here, with musical, linguistic, gestural, and (perhaps subsuming all of these) metaphorical aspects all articulating a cohesive, deeply embedded system of drives and directions. Postponing any further investigation into this broader inquiry for now, this analysis of vocal performance in the second verse of "Like A Rolling Stone" reveals much common ground between speech and song in the transmission and reception of meaning, though the precise nature of this shared sign-system may only be understood through further interdisciplinary inquiry.

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