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The **Rough Guide** to
Bob Dylan
by Nigel Williamson

The Early Years

1941–59

“I have no respect for factual knowledge,” Bob Dylan once declared. “I don’t care what anybody knows. I don’t care if somebody’s a walking encyclopaedia.” And, over the years, he has often attempted to confuse and mislead those seeking factual knowledge about his life with a stream of misinformation and even downright lies. “My childhood is so far away,” he told one interviewer with typically diversionary tactics. “It’s like I don’t even remember being a child. I’m not even sure what happened to me yesterday was true.” Yet Dylan’s persistent evasions and the fierceness of his desire to protect his privacy have only served to enhance the myth and to fuel our curiosity yet further – as he knows only too well.

1941–55: North Country Blues

The bald facts of Dylan’s early existence are well-enough known. **Robert Allen Zimmerman** – who was also given the Hebrew name **Shabtai Zisel ben Avraham** – was born at 9.05pm on May 24, 1941. The twenty-and-a-half-inch baby boy, weighing 8lb 13oz and reportedly with a disproportionately large head, was the first born of **Abraham and Beatrice Zimmerman** of Duluth, Minnesota, a small mining town near the Canadian border. For those who think these factors are significant, Dylan’s birth date makes him a Gemini – though as late as 1991 he was still laying smokescreens of confusion by reproducing his driving licence in the booklet accompanying a career-retrospective CD with his date of birth mischievously altered to May 11. Thus,

with a dash of Tipp-Ex, he transformed himself into a fake Taurus and sent Dylan-watching astrologists into star-chart meltdown.

In Europe, the German forces were in the throes of completing the invasion of the Greek islands. But the United States was still officially at peace and the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 – which would trigger the US’s entry into World War II – was still more than six months away. Still, the Zimmermans must have wondered about the war several thousands of miles away, for Dylan’s paternal grandparents **Zigman and Anna Zimmerman** had fled the Tsarist pogroms, sailing from the Black Sea port of Odessa in 1907 to seek a new life in the Land of the Free.

The Zimmermans believed in the virtues of hard work and the sanctity of the family and had done tolerably well for themselves in the New World. Beatrice's family, the Stones, were also Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe and her father owned a small chain of regional theatres. By 1946, however, they had fallen on harder times. A second son, David, had arrived, and Abe had lost his job and been stricken with polio, which left him with a permanent limp. The following year the family moved 75 miles up country from Duluth to **Hibbing** (see box opposite), built on the rocky western shore of Lake Superior. Hibbing was also Beatrice's hometown and the Zimmermans moved in with her widowed mother. But Abe was soon back on his feet and joined his brothers Paul and Maurice in a new business venture, selling furniture and electrical goods. With the war over and a mass-market consumer boom in full swing, the Zimmermans' circumstances swiftly improved. By 1948, the family had moved into a two-storey detached home at 2425 Seventh Avenue.

In such respectable and relatively comfortable middle-class circumstances, Dylan grew up a quiet and introspective child and a well-behaved and dutiful son. As Patrick Humphries has written, "With every crumb picked up from the detritus of Dylan's early years and adolescence, you try to detect the extraordinary, sifting for signs of that remarkable future. But in truth, and without the benefit of hindsight, you would have been hard-pressed to distinguish the young Robert Zimmerman from his contemporaries." In *Chronicles Volume One*, Dylan himself describes an existence that was

ordinary to the point of dullness. Even the regular air-raid drills which forced him and his fellow school pupils to take cover under their desks in simulation of a Russian bomb attack, became part of the routine. "Mostly what I did growing up was bide my time," he concludes.

At **Nettleton** elementary school, the young Dylan was not a bad student. And he showed an early love for **poetry**, spending hours in his room scribbling and drawing, and writing poems for his parents on Mother's Day and Father's Day. Yet his relationship with his father was characterized by an Old Testament-style sternness. When he received a lifetime achievement award in a televised ceremony in 1991, he stood silently for a long half-minute. Then he made a rare and extraordinary comment on his childhood: "My daddy once said to me, he said, 'Son, it is possible for you to become so defiled in this world that your own mother and father will abandon you. If that happens, God will believe in your own ability to mend your own ways.'"

Yet amid such solemn pronouncements, there were youthful diversions: reading Classics Illustrated comic books, watching cowboy films at Hibbing's Lybba Theater (owned by relatives and named after Dylan's Lithuanian maternal great-grandmother), and hours spent in front of the television purchased by the family in 1952, one of the first sets to appear in Hibbing. Dylan was **bar mitzvahed** in May 1954 and for a while he appears to have taken his Jewish background seriously. Years later he described the rabbi he used to meet. "He was an old man from Brooklyn who wore a white

Hibbing, Minnesota

“There was really nothing there” Bob Dylan

The town of **Hibbing** provided an unremarkable backdrop to Bob Dylan's largely unremarkable existence from the age of six until eighteen, when he moved to Minnesota to enrol as a university student.

In the 1920s, the area's rich **iron-ore** deposits had brought a mini-boom to the town and huge open-cast mines scarred the local countryside. The demand for iron in World War II had also brought prosperity. But by the time Dylan was growing up, the best deposits had been exhausted and employment was in short supply. He later revisited this depressingly unglamorous environment in **North Country Blues** in 1964, a song in which he painted an evocative picture of a town where the red iron pits had once “ran plenty” but where “the cardboard-filled windows and old men on the benches tell you know that the whole town is empty”.

“There was really nothing there,” he later claimed. “The only thing you could do there was be a miner and even that kind of thing was getting less and less.” Yet he still maintained a certain sentimental fondness for the place: “The people that lived there, they're nice people. I've been all over the world since

I left there and they still stand out as being the least hung-up. The mines were dying, that's all, but that's not their fault. I didn't run away from it. I just turned my back on it.”

In the 1990s, he was to paint a more idealised portrait of Hibbing. “Knife sharpeners would come down the street,” he claimed. “Every once in a while a wagon would come through town with a gorilla in a cage or, I remember, a mummy under glass. It was a very itinerant place, just country roads everywhere. There was an innocence about it all and I don't remember anything bad ever happening. That was the '50s, the last period I remember as being idyllic.”

A contemporary map of the district more than forty years after Dylan left it for good is revealing. The Hull-Rust Mahoning Mine is still marked, a gash in the earth three miles wide and 500 feet deep. But other, newer landmarks, such as The Iron Range Tour, The Minnesota Museum of Mining and Ironworld USA indicate a mining industry not only rusted, but decayed, destroyed and eventually, decades later, turned into a heritage attraction.

beard and wore a black hat and black clothes. They put him upstairs above the café where I used to hang out. I used to go there every day to learn this stuff, after school or after dinner. After studying with him for an hour or so, I'd come down and boogie.”

A 1955 photo from the **Hibbing High School** yearbook shows a bright-eyed, clean-cut, smart Jewish boy with slightly chubby cheeks, known as “**Zimbo**” to his classmates. But, as with mil-

lions of other teenagers of the time, the spirit of rebellion was beginning to stir in him – and its main instigator was **James Dean** (see box, over), whose death in September 1955 gave the nascent rock'n'roll era its first martyr. His film *Rebel Without A Cause* reached Hibbing that winter. The young Dylan saw it several times, trading lines from the film with his closest friend John Bucklen and covering his bedroom walls with pictures of the dead actor.

The Rebel Who Gave Dylan a Cause



James Dean puts his feet up in *Giant*, which the young Dylan watched time and time again

When *Rebel Without A Cause* reached Hibbing's picture houses in the winter of 1955, James Dean was already dead, killed in an automobile accident near Paso Robles at the age of 24. The young Robert Zimmerman saw the film and bought in to the Dean myth, like a million other American teenagers of the time. But Dylan's fixation appears to have been peculiarly strong.

It was almost as if he thought he was **Jim Stark**, the character Dean had played in the film. He bought a red biker-jacket like the one worn by Stark, mouthed the lines and scoured movie magazines for pictures of his hero, which he pasted on his bedroom walls. He also devoured Dean's two other movies, *East Of Eden* and *Giant*, watching them over and over again at every opportunity. One night, Dylan was caught by

his parents sneaking home past his curfew after seeing *Giant*. His father followed him to his room. "James Dean! James Dean!", Abe Zimmerman repeated as his son tried to explain. He ripped one of the dead actor's pictures off the wall. "Don't do that!", Dylan yelled as his father tore it into pieces and threw them on the floor.

Elvis Presley would soon supersede Dean as Dylan's pre-eminent teenage inspiration. "When I first heard Elvis's voice I just knew I wasn't going to work for anybody and nobody was gonna be my boss," he later said. "Hearing him for the first time was like busting out of jail." But Dean was there first to turn the key in the cell door. "I liked him for the same reasons you like anybody, I guess," Dylan recalled in 1987. "You see something of yourself in them."

1956–59: Busting Out of Jail

“I ran away from home when I was 10, 12, 13, 15, 15 and a half, 17 an’ 18. I been caught and brought back all but once.” Bob Dylan

Dylan had shown some musical ability at an early age, amusing the Zimmermans’ relatives by singing “Accentuate The Positive” at family parties when he was five. By the age of eleven he’d learned the rudiments of **piano** playing from his cousin, Harriet Rutstein, though he soon dispensed with her services, opting to teach himself instead. He also tried other instruments, including the saxophone and trumpet, before settling on a cheap **acoustic guitar**.

Before long, he was listening to scratchy versions of tunes by the “King of Country Music”, **Hank Williams**. Also known as “the Hillbilly Shakespeare”, Williams was already dead by the time Dylan discovered him, having expired on New Year’s Day 1953 when his heart, overtaxed by booze and pills, gave out in the back of a Cadillac. But he has remained one of Dylan’s musical heroes for half a century. “In time,” he wrote in *Chronicles*, “I became aware that in Hank’s recorded songs were the archetypal rules of poetic songwriting.” Then there were the “race” records he heard on stations out of Little Rock and Chicago, by the likes of **John Lee Hooker**, **Howlin’ Wolf** and **Jimmy Reed**. Dylan not only loved the music – he soon adopted the hipster jive he heard the DJs talking between the records.

He also heard rock’n’rollers. Indeed, long before Dylan discovered folk music and mod-

elled himself on Woody Guthrie, his musical role models were the likes of **Elvis Presley** and **Chuck Berry**. **Little Richard** was a particular inspiration and Dylan spent hours copying his pounding piano riffs, played standing up at the Zimmerman family’s baby-grand piano. Such was the impact on the youthful Dylan that, as the writer John Harris put it, “Abe’s hopes that his elder son might eventually join him in the family business probably went belly-up the moment “Tutti Frutti”’s fearsome ‘Awopbopal oobopawopbamboom’ first came howling over the Minnesota airwaves.”

By 1956, Dylan was playing in a group called **The Jokers**, formed at a Jewish summer camp. They went on to perform at high-school dances and even appeared on a local television show in Minneapolis, 190 miles south of Hibbing, where that summer Dylan and friends Howard Rutman and Larry Keegan paid five dollars to cut a 78rpm record. Dylan played piano while they all harmonised on a rock’n’roll medley that included Gene Vincent’s “Be-Bop-A-Lula” and The Penguins’ “Earth Angel”. Had his early musical leanings been better known, then perhaps there would not have been quite such controversy when almost a decade later in 1965 he abandoned his acoustic guitar and “went electric”.

Dylan continued with The Jokers for a year or more, playing in matching hand-knitted

The Early Years

red-and-grey sleeveless cardigans on weekend visits to the twin cities of Minneapolis and St Paul. His first hometown band, **The Shadow Blasters**, was formed with school friends in 1957, when they played a Jacket Jamboree talent show in the high-school auditorium and Zimbo massacred two Little Richard numbers at the piano. “African shrieking”, one teacher called his singing style. The Shadow Blasters only ever played one further gig, but Dylan was on the way. Soon he had graduated to an **electric guitar**, first a cheap model from a Sears Roebuck catalogue and then a solid-body Surpo with a gold sunburst.

He was growing fast, and Hibbing would soon no longer be able to hold him. For his sixteenth birthday in 1957 he got his first car, a pink Ford convertible. A Harley-Davidson motorcycle followed. He was a terrible driver whether on two or four wheels and there were various scrapes and accidents.

Soon after, he met **Echo Helstrom**. Echo’s family had come from Finland and lived in the woods, three miles out of Hibbing at Maple Hill. Dylan was attracted to her blonde hair and the leather jacket and jeans she sported on a weekend. She first set eyes on Dylan playing his guitar and singing on a street corner in the snow. They met later that night in the L&B Café and discovered a shared love of a late-night radio music show called *No-Name Jive*. Dylan wanted to show off his limited piano skills and they went next door to the Moose Lodge. Echo prised the locked piano lid open with her pen-knife for Bob to play and he was hooked. For the next year or so they became inseparable.

Dylan’s next band was **The Golden Chords**, a trio that included **Leroy Hoikkola** on drums, **Monte Edwardson** on guitar and Bobby Zimmerman, as he was now billed, on piano. When they appeared at a high-school show in early 1958, Dylan adapted the words of a Little Richard number to sing, “Gotta get a girl



Little Richard, whose pounding piano riffs took the young Dylan by storm

between 1988 and 2000. From The Beatles' "Nowhere Man" to Charles Aznavour's "The Times We've Known", it's a mind-boggling

collection that ranges from the convincing and inspired to the bewildering "why did he do that?" awfulness.

Curiosities & Covers

Dylan Top 10s

Ten comic Dylan songs

"He's an absolute fucking riot!"

Chrissie Hynde on Dylan, August 2003

1. Talkin' John Birch Paranoid Blues

Available on *The Bootleg Series Vols I-III* (1991)

The John Birch Society was a right-wing organization, born in the McCarthyite era, obsessed with imagined communist infiltration. In Dylan's sharp satire, a member of the society looks under his bed for a Red, up his chimney, in the glove compartment of his car and down his toilet. Less amusingly, Dylan was banned from singing the song on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in May 1963. To his credit, he walked off the set and refused to appear on the programme.

2. I Shall Be Free

Available on *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (1963)

Given the intensity of the protest and the poignancy of the love songs on *Freewheelin'*,

Dylan decided he'd better leave 'em laughing. The hilarious "I Shall Be Free" namechecks Yul Brynner, Charles de Gaulle and President Kennedy, who calls up Dylan and asks him what will make the country grow. "Brigitte Bardot, Anita Ekberg, Sophia Loren ... country'll grow" comes the answer. OK, it loses something on the page. But on the record his timing is masterful and, on such form, an alternative career in stand-up could have awaited.

3. I Shall Be Free No. 10

Available on *Another Side Of Bob Dylan* (1964)

Sadly, Dylan never released "I Shall Be Free" numbers two to nine, if they ever existed. But when he found himself getting over-serious on *Another Side Of Bob Dylan*, as he picked at the scabs of his break-up with Suze Rotolo, he lightened proceedings with a comic talking blues that sounds as if it was more or less delivered on the hoof, and which contains the self-mocking, "I'm a poet, and I know it, hope I don't blow it..."