

Legends come in all shapes and sizes

A few weeks ago, I caught a 60 Minutes program in which Bob Dylan was being interviewed by Ed Bradley. As one of the few living legends in the arts remaining, this was Dylan's first interview in nearly 20 years and a time for reflection by the troubadour on his 43-year-old career.

No one can argue that Dylan's distinctive twang and poetic lyrics have produced some of the most memorable songs ever written. In the 1960's, his songs of protest and turmoil spoke to an entire generation, and I, too, bought his records and played them over and over again. My mother, however, did not share a similar high regard for Dylan's voice and there were many times when she'd bang the ceiling with a broom as a signal from the downstairs kitchen that my hi-fi was just a wee bit too loud. As Mom so aptly put it, "His voice sounds like a cat that's tail has been run over by a rocking chair."



As I
see it

Peg DeMarco

But Dylan was the voice of his generation and as I listened to him field Bradley's questions on the 60 Minutes program, I wondered what it would be like to be considered a living legend. Dylan, however, soon dashed any warm and fuzzy feelings that I could conjure up because he would have none of the accolades Bradley tried to laud upon him. With his ever-present perpetual scowl, Dylan revealed his

distaste for any other title the media had given him, now and in the past, except for that of simple musician.

I guess that's part of being a living legend — a sense of humility. But Dylan wasn't always humble, at least not in his early songwriting career. His songs were arrogant, brash, and often taunts at a government who got involved in a war that he and so many others didn't support. His "Like a Rolling Stone," voted best song of all time, isn't a joyful song. It contains haunting lyrics of loneliness and frustration that symbolizes a young person's quest to set out on his or her own in a world filled with tangible and intangible barriers to success and happiness.

What interested me most about Dylan's interview was Bradley's question, "Do you ever look back at the music you've written with surprise?" and Dylan's response, "I don't know how I got to write those songs. Those early songs were almost magically written. I did it once, but I can't do it again." Dylan goes on to hint that God had a hand in helping him write the words that would be etched in our minds forever, and I'm glad that he was able to bring it to all of us to enjoy for years to come.

Like Dylan, my generation was also fortunate to have had other powerful pop icons that still reflect the Americana way of life today. For instance, one day I was watching the movie "Rebel without a Cause" on Turner Movie Classics and my daughter commented, "I don't see what's so great about James Dean. He's no big deal."

I smiled and brought out one of the Hollywood movie books that my mother had collected and given to me. I turned to a picture of James Dean strolling down a New York street dressed in blue jeans, black leather bomber jacket, with a cigarette dangling out of the corner of his mouth. His eyes looked disturbed, but there was a slight smile at the corners of his mouth.

"James Dean was, and always will be, a legend even though he died so young. He was the original rebel," I said, pointing to the picture as my daughter curiously listened. "The way he looks in this picture and what he portrayed on the screen became the foundation for a whole generation of young people. He showed us on the screen and in his private life that it was normal to experience growing pains, okay to stand up to something or someone that he didn't always agree with, yet smart enough to ask for help and advice when he needed it. He showed us that being a teenager was a natural slice of life."

That's what legends do, I suppose — make a lasting impression on us that time can't seem to dilute. Take Elvis Presley, for instance, one of the most famous American legends of all. Elvis was thrust into the limelight when he began his singing career in 1954 and was revered as "the King" right up to his death on Aug. 16, 1977. Most people will always consider him the King of Rock and Roll and his fans remain loyal and true. If you doubt that for a moment, consider that there are 650,000 Web sites that mention Elvis Presley on the Internet today. That's quite a feat for a man who has been dead for 27 years. If that isn't a legend, I don't know what is.

Pop legends today come in all shapes and sizes, all nationalities and religions, all walks of life. For example, consider Stevie Wonder. Is there any other musician that comes close to his genius for songwriting, piano playing and singing? For one who cannot see, his music replicates that not only can he see, but he can probably see much clearer than many of us.

Michael Jordan is a sports legend for his abilities, but his remarkable work for charity puts him into an even higher class. And can any actor even come close to Robert DeNiro's or Meryl Streep's amazing performances on the silver screen? They take us into a character's mind, something pretty difficult to do considering the guidance they usually receive is merely a two-inch screenplay devoid of emotion.

Take a look at some of the most beautiful actresses from the 1930's to current day. I don't know about you, but I get tired of reading about who got liposuction or who has decided that wearing as little as possible to an awards show is classy. Is there any actress today that magically lights up the screen the moment the camera catches a glimpse of her? I can't think of one, except perhaps Julia Roberts, but she's now busy with twins so she may be out of commission for a while.

Consider that Greta Garbo didn't speak until talkies were made, but the moment the camera caught sight of her, the screen and the audience seemed to fall in love with her. And when she finally spoke, her throaty Swedish accent reinforced the strength of her character and the depth of her beauty. She was chased and hounded by the press, reluctant to become a legend, and eventually quit Hollywood and retreated into what she hoped would be obscurity. The press, however, wouldn't leave her alone until the day she died. It seems that some reluctant legends cannot rest until it becomes permanent.

Clark Gable had ears that stuck out, Gary Cooper had big feet, Katharine Hepburn made wearing pleated slacks fashionable and Bette Davis had ... well, those Bette Davis eyes, all legends in their own right, and all contributors to American culture. But what makes a legend a legend? Will we remember Celine Dion and Madonna years from now? Are there any hip hoppers that will be around for even the next couple of years? Will there be any singer that simply stands on a stage, dressed in plain clothes, with or without a guitar, who will take us to new heights with remarkable lyrics and haunting music?

If we stick a time capsule into the ground in 2005, who will we use as symbols of our current generation or culture? Dylan, and rightly so, is tired of the title.

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