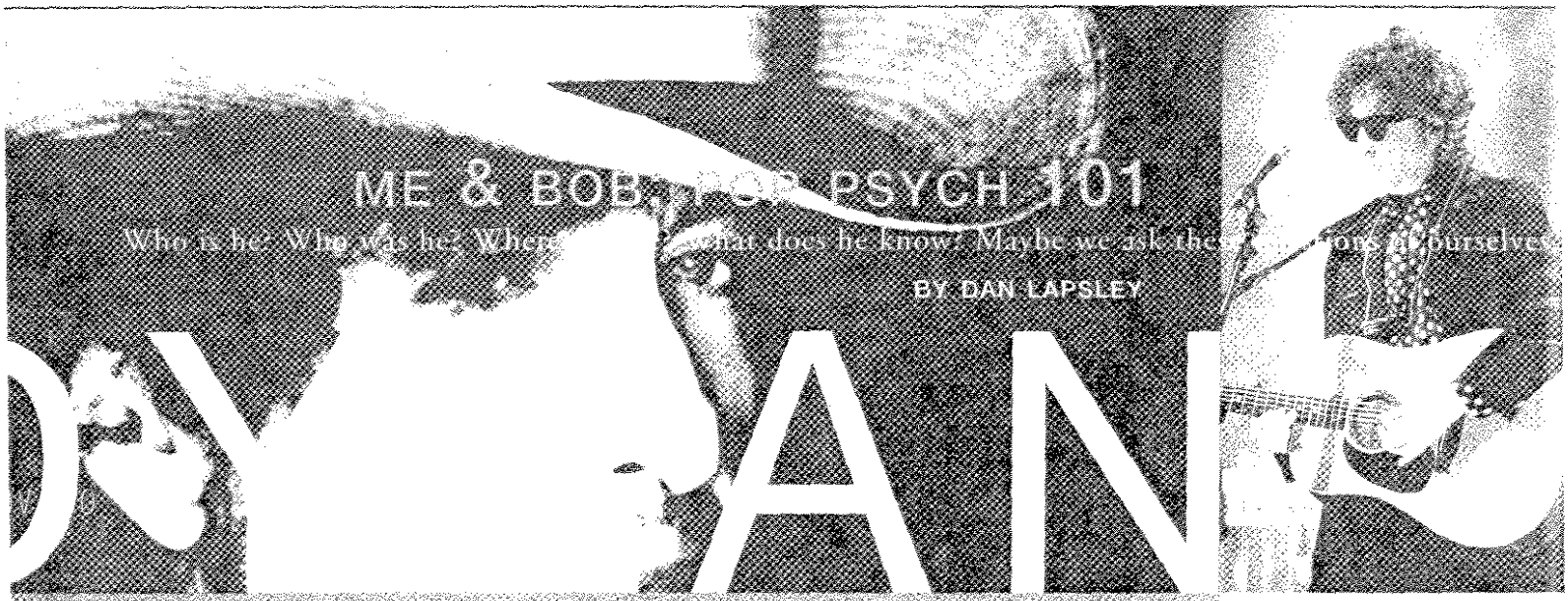
# FANISM 1. PAGES 60, 62, 64, 66, 68.

*What do Sid Vicious, Glenn Gould, Madonna, Kurt Cobain, Michael Jackson, and Elvis Presley have in common? Why is the current generation generation? Why does Michael Jackson want to be a boy/girl? Why does Mick Jagger dress in drag? Why did Robert Zimmerman become Bob Dylan? Why why are we obsessed with their lives and deaths? Why do the famous tranquilize their minds and bodies with drugs and alcohol? Why do performers*



## ME & BOB, OR PSYCH 101

Who is he? Who was he? Where [illegible] what does he know? Maybe we ask these [illegible]ions of ourselves.

BY DAN LAPSLEY

I have been an avid devotee of Bob Dylan since I was eleven years old. This was 1965. During this year I was actively trading 45's with a kid down the street. In our negotiations over a hot new Beatles' single and a Rolling Stones hit, I somehow came into possession of Dylan's single, "Positively Fourth Street" — "you've got a lot of nerve to say you are my friend." I was floored by the content of this song. There wasn't anybody writing songs like this, songs that hit back at rivals with the sort of bitter, ironic sarcasm that few of us could express on our own terms, but here was Bob, giving it voice for us.

During the next year I hummed this song quite a lot walking the halls of my grade school, using it as a weapon against inconstant friends. And there were to be other songs, other weapons, other targets. On the cusp of my adolescence Dylan grew in stature and became an increasingly important preoccupation of mine. By this time he was already "retreating into the vapors of legend," taking refuge from the impossible demands of fame in the isolation of his Woodstock retreat, where he would remain for seven years. Yet I was just discovering his work, and his voice, all afresh.

In short order I purchased all of his previously released albums, except for *John Wesley Harding*, which I shoplifted along with a Neil Young album. I have a vivid memory of one Saturday afternoon, sticking

With Dylan you couldn t really be sure if he was singing a poem or reciting a song.

Photos courtesy of Sony Music

sure I caught all of the words to "Mr. Tambourine Man." Somehow the words mattered. I was struck at the time by the complicated rhyming patterns, the dark interiority of the songs, the fantastic images and characters, the nuance of his verbal phrasing, and the swagger in his voice. And also Dylan's poetic pretensions. Good heavens, here was a singer who wrote poems on the jackets of his albums. With Dylan you couldn't really be sure if he was singing a poem or reciting a song.

Somehow the words mattered. With words Dylan articulated what seemed crucial to me. When love went awry, when longing was frustrated, when friendships were lost or disappointing, Dylan was a consolation. There was always a song, a lyric, a tonal flourish that seemed to provide the needed catharsis. *Blood on the Tracks* and *Blonde on Blonde* are perhaps best listened to with a broken heart. Dylan became a "secret sharer" in my relational life, or was that the other way around? Somehow emotional complexities found a place in a Dylan setting. Somehow all of the dark and whimsical ambiguities of realistic lives found a place in an image, a clever line, or in the swagger of a melody. And in That Voice.

important to me. Here was an artist who brought an ethical tone to popular music, and who therefore rescued popular music from crashing irrelevance by making it count for something, stand for something. It was Dylan who revealed the subversive possibilities of rock and roll. It was Dylan who took up the fundamental issues of identity, of personal redemption and the ambiguities of love, and what it meant to be misunderstood. Dylan, who rebelled against conventionality, who celebrated the outsider, the outlaw, the person who lived on the fringes of respectability, gave credibility, and not a little courage, to every adolescent who struggled with the compelling problem of "fitting in" and being accepted. Is there a young person anywhere who does not wrestle with these issues—outsider, misunderstood, yearning for love and acceptance, the feeling of being lost, "with no direction home"? Not many, I suppose. Dylan captured for me the brooding indignation and shadowy moods that often haunt adolescents, always in his inimitable, oblique way. Always in That Voice. Deep mystery attended his very person. This seemed important, too. Mercurial interviews seemed to betray deep, Delphic insights. He embodied an attitude, a posture. Here was a man of depth, on the edge, utterly original. His looks, his voice, was changeful, protean. Who was he? Where was he? What does he know? Maybe I was asking these questions of myself. I scoured Rolling Stone looking for his name. Dylan lyrics were my typical doodles. I wanted to be a poet.

By the latter years of high school I was known as the premier Dylan fan in my community. This set me apart, gave me a certain identity. I took to wearing a stained, second-hand suede coat because it resembled the coat Dylan wore on the jacket of *Blonde on Blonde*. I affected a sense of deep introspective moodiness because Dylan was never photographed with a smile.

In my university years I became more militant in my advocacy of Dylan. I promoted his music, and his achievements with an evangelical zeal that would make Elmer Gantry blush. Stray anti-Dylan remarks were keenly felt. I took it personally. No one could own to the opinion that "Dylan can't sing" in my presence without risking a verbal brawl with me. The Voice, after all, was everything. This rough-hewn voice chokes with the husk and bark of life, the voice of ages, the authentic voice of the American experience, the voice of the cowboy holler, the

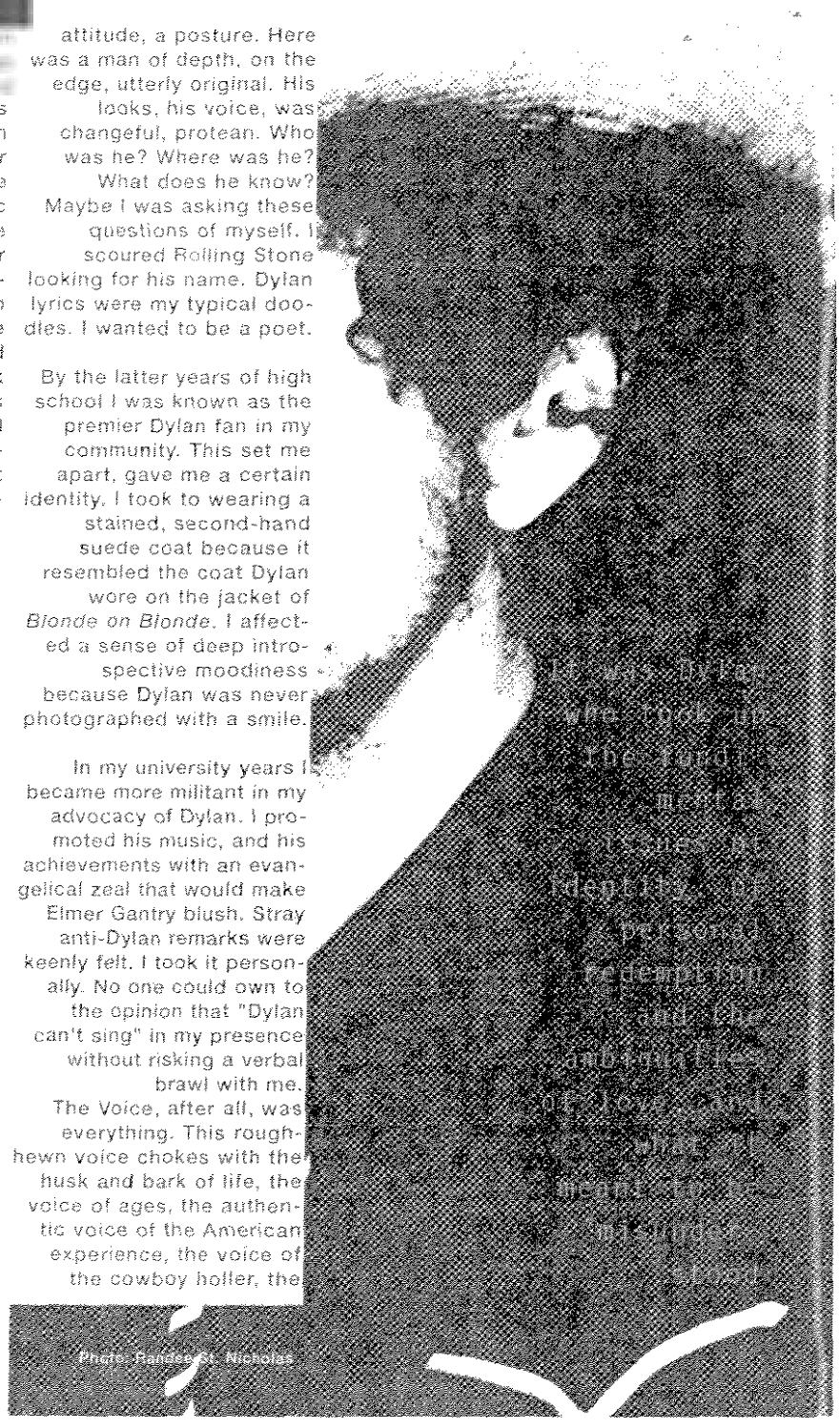


Photo: Pandora A. Nicholas

porch-singer, "the greatest blues singer in the west," as Allen Ginsberg put it. As one fellow traveler put it to me: "We like Bob rough." What is important about Dylan's singing is not the notes he hits, but the notes he aims for. I laughed when I heard this. Good old Bob!

Bob Dylan gives voice to my deepest sensitivities—in That Voice. This became my stock answer whenever people asked me to account for my unusual devotion to Dylan and his music, although I am not unaware of how pretentious that sounds, what, with the implication that I am "deep" and "sensitive," and that only a person of Dylan's talent can make sense of my personal mystique (as if I had a "mystique"). Still, I had to come up with something.

But that's not the worst of it. I also said this: "If you take away from Bob Dylan all of his talent, what you are left with—is me." This now strikes me as a very peculiar thing to say, although I cannot imagine ever actually believing it. Still it does convey the depth of my attachment to this artist—an attachment that seems to go far beyond the pale of mere fanism.

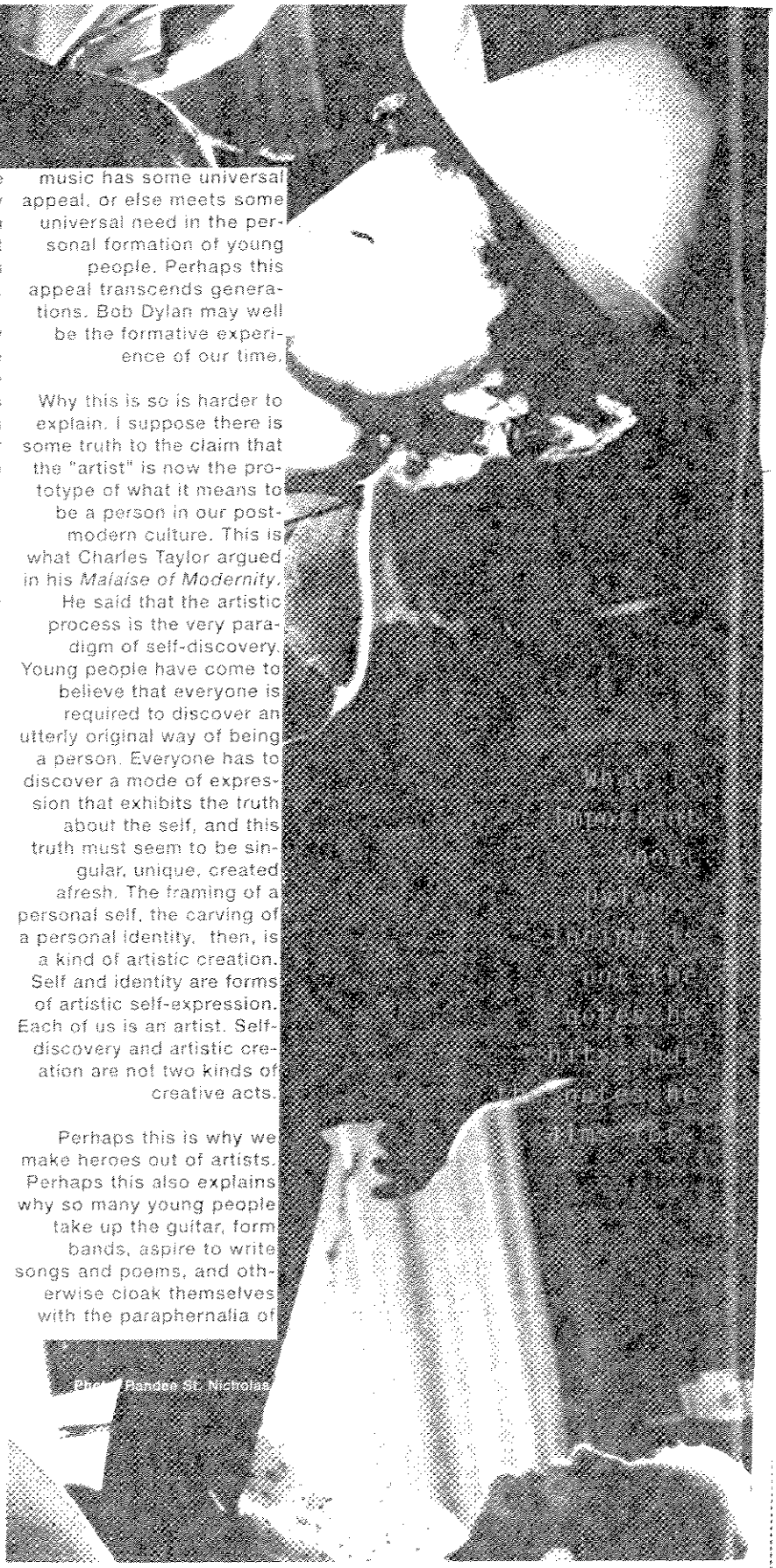
I am now 41 years old, and this attachment has not abated, though it is not so militant. I suspect that my reasons for listening to Dylan today are quite different than they were many years ago. Now my friends can expect only an occasional snarl if That Voice is not appreciated as much as I would like.

But Dylan is still the only artist I would bother to see in concert—and I have bothered 13 times. His most recent album is always my favorite. I never felt "betrayed" when he abandoned protest songs, went electric, sang with Johnny Cash, recorded in Nashville, or found Jesus. I still wear "Bob Dylan sunglasses"—Wayfarer's—and get peeved when the "Blues Brothers" are mentioned by way of comment on them (although I do concede priority of fashion to Roy Orbison). I am always ready to talk about Bob—we all call him "Bob"—to the uninitiated, but I am not the proselyte I once was. Dylan once said that if you didn't understand one of his songs, then it wasn't written for you. And I guess that is my attitude as well, if you don't like Dylan, then I suppose his music wasn't meant for you.

But I think there is something for everybody in the vast Dylan corpus. I have found that all it takes to hook someone is to just let them listen to the music. I am still confident that Bob could win most anybody over. I have seen two generations of young people of my acquaintance take up the Dylan cause. This leads me to think that Dylan's music has some universal appeal, or else meets some universal need in the personal formation of young people. Perhaps this appeal transcends generations. Bob Dylan may well be the formative experience of our time.

Why this is so is harder to explain. I suppose there is some truth to the claim that the "artist" is now the prototype of what it means to be a person in our postmodern culture. This is what Charles Taylor argued in his *Malaise of Modernity*. He said that the artistic process is the very paradigm of self-discovery. Young people have come to believe that everyone is required to discover an utterly original way of being a person. Everyone has to discover a mode of expression that exhibits the truth about the self, and this truth must seem to be singular, unique, created afresh. The framing of a personal self, the carving of a personal identity, then, is a kind of artistic creation. Self and identity are forms of artistic self-expression. Each of us is an artist. Self-discovery and artistic creation are not two kinds of creative acts.

Perhaps this is why we make heroes out of artists. Perhaps this also explains why so many young people take up the guitar, form bands, aspire to write songs and poems, and otherwise cloak themselves with the paraphernalia of



Church Pander St. Nicholas

"creative artist" (and this seems more true today than in my own adolescence). This creative self-expressing, this artistic exhibitionism, is the favoured method of self-discovery, to be sure, but it is also a way of making oneself seem heroic.

Heinz Kohut, the architect of self psychology, once argued that the works of great artists reflect the psychological problems of their time. The great artist works out in song and melody the anxieties of their age. And these artistic products come to perform a variety of selfobject functions for us.

During periods of self development, in infancy, certainly, and during adolescence as well, the self is not well structured. It is weak, amorphous. In fact, during adolescence a variety of self-options are explored, many of which show little continuity over time. Hence, because the self is vulnerable and cannot stand alone, the participation of others is required in order to provide a measure of consistency, continuity, and resilience. These others Kohut calls selfobjects, insofar as they are objectively separate persons who come to perform functions which will later be taken over by the self—selfobjects.

But two kinds of relationships are possible with one's selfobjects. One relationship emphasizes "mirroring," the other emphasizes "merger." In a mirroring relationship one wishes to display and to be admired for one's evolving capabilities. Here the self-object mirrors back one's own sense of narcissistic grandiosity. It is as if one says: "I am perfect, and you admire me."

In contrast one may wish to merge with one's idealized selfobject in order to participate in his or her experience. In this case the self-object provides a range of experiences that are critical for one's own self-development. It is as if one says: "You are perfect, and I am part of you."

Kohut suggests that these two kinds of relationships yield two poles around which the self develops, and the cultivation of at least one of the poles is required for normal psychological development. Furthermore, he links the mirroring pole to one's relationship with mother, and the idealizing pole to one's relationship with father. In the traditional family drama we want to be like our fathers, and we want our mothers to be proud of us. Yet cultural heroes, particularly artists, may serve similar mirroring or idealizing functions in the self development of young people.

The tendency towards artistic exhibitionism, the desire to be admired for one's evolving capabilities, to be "heroized" for one's creative acts of self-discovery, reflects the mirroring pole of self-development. It explains why young people want to be be thought of as "artistic." It explains why the adolescent seeks an audience for his or her exhibitionistic displays. It is as if one says: "I am perfect, deep, authentic, I display to you my very original self, and you admire me." When we see the self reflected in the admiring gaze of our audience, when the self is observed in the gleam of the other's eye, the self takes cohesive form. It takes on a felt reality. The self is validated, experienced. It is really there. As Dylan put it in song: "I've got to know, babe, will you surround me, so I can know if I am really real?"

But this doesn't quite explain why young people in fact form the sort of relationships with their heroes that I formed with Dylan. It would not explain the histrionic and maudlin reaction to the horrific murder of John Lennon or the pathetic suicide of Kurt Cobain. It would not explain why Elvis Presley resurrection stories keep surfacing from time to time. Here we need recourse to the merger pole of self-development, to our desire to merge with our idealizing selfobject, to participate in the experience of the great artist, to partake of perfection when our own

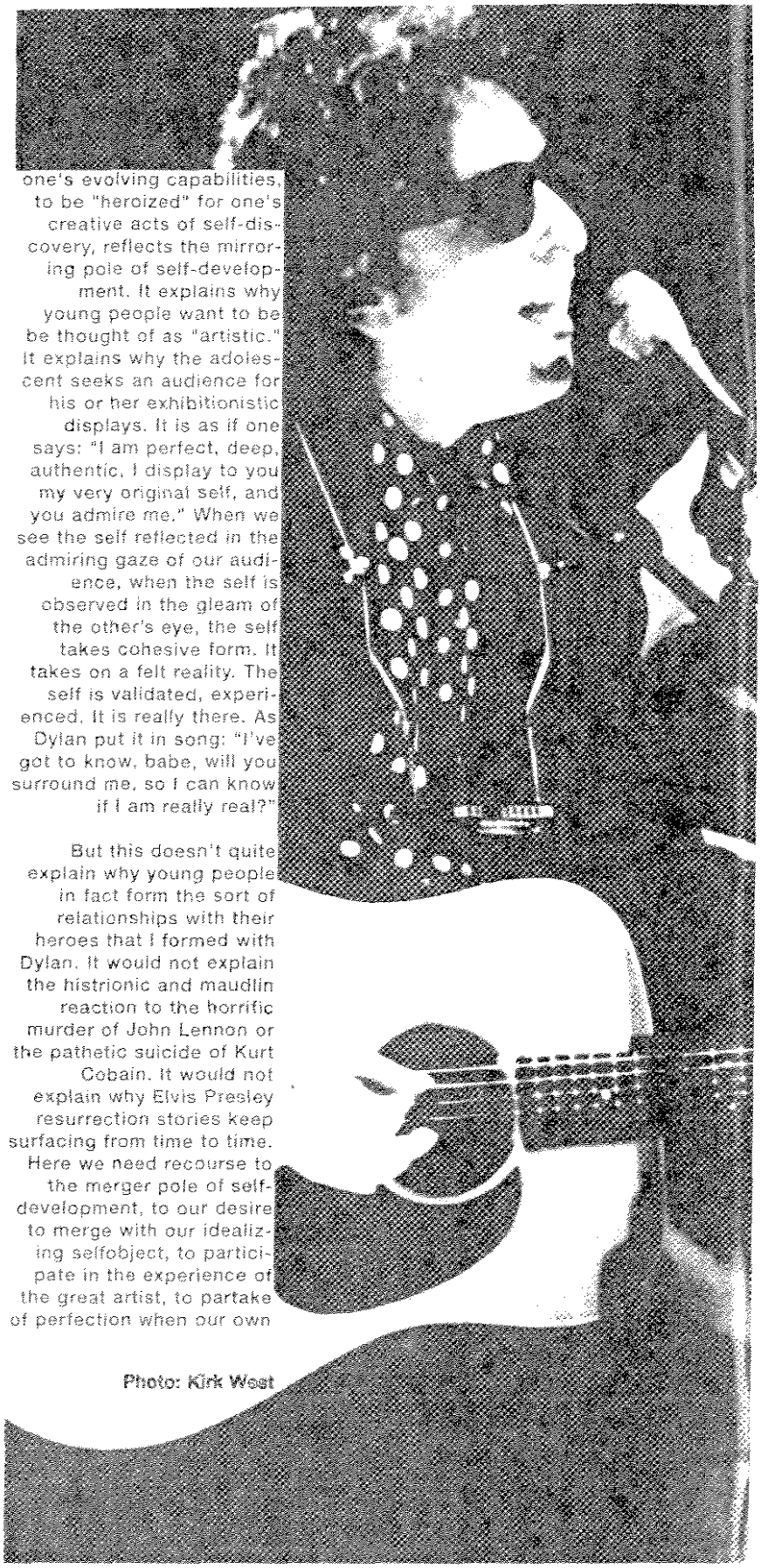


Photo: Kirk West

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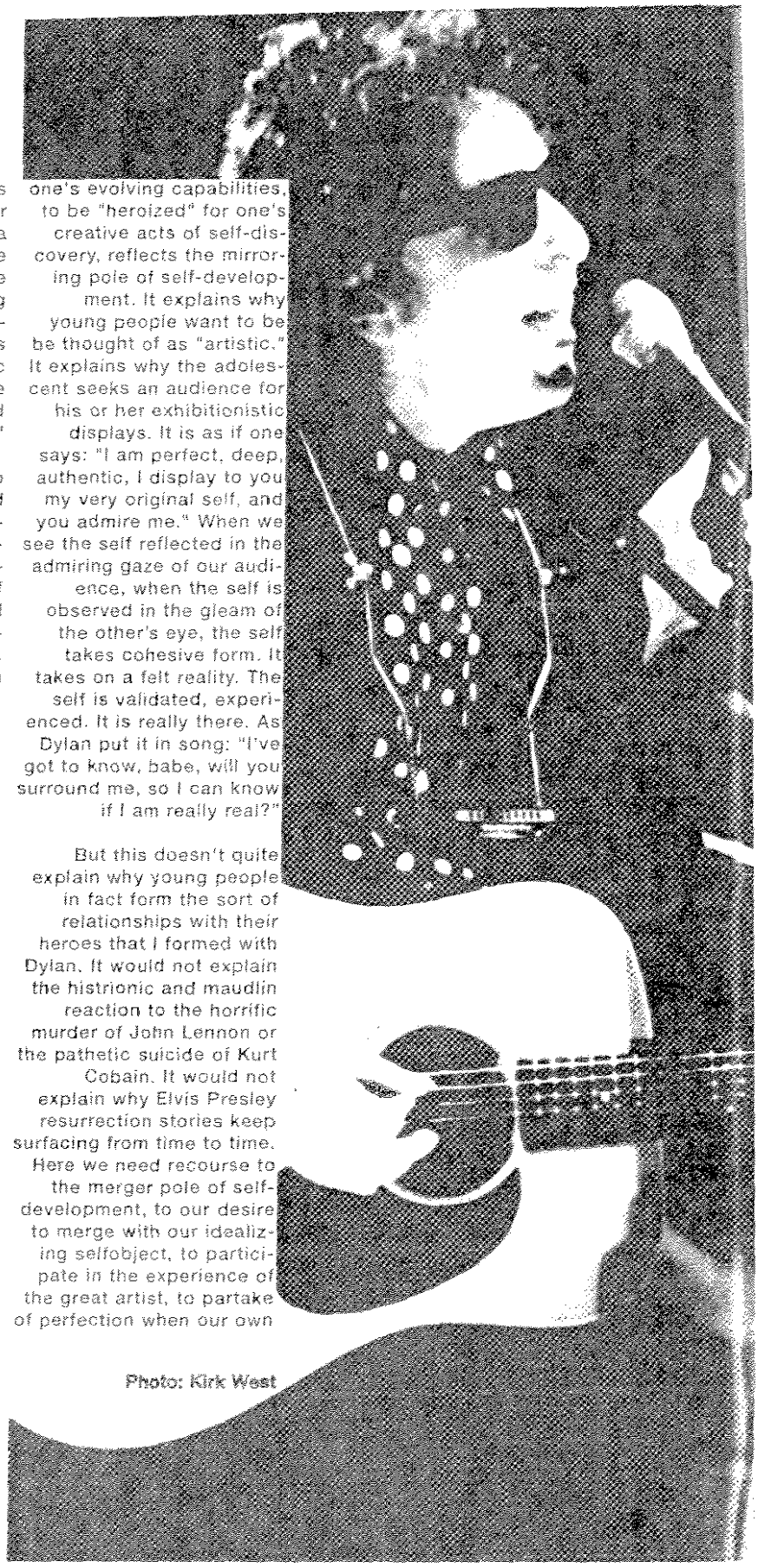


Photo: Kirk West

ego is vulnerable. "You are perfect and I am part of you." How else to explain my own identification with Dylan? Or why I reacted so personally to criticisms of him? How else to explain the deep sense of loss at the death of a great artist? In these cases we are mourning the loss of our selfobject, to be sure, but more fundamentally we are mourning the loss of ourselves.

Dylan, then, as selfobject. The great artist providing in lyrics and melody and voice the idealizing functions that support self-development when support is most critical. To merge with the idealized artist is to take a stand on being a self. To cultivate this identification is to commit to being a person. It is one pole around which the self develops. It is with this understanding that I can now say that Bob Dylan has been the most important influence on my life.

On his *Oh Mercy* album, Dylan has a song, "What Was It You Wanted?" which is a question that is repeatedly posed to his fans and admirers. This is the only explicit communication that Dylan has ever directed to his fans, although, characteristically, I am sure that he would deny that the song is to be understood in this way. Nonetheless, the lyric does reflect his studied indifference to the demands placed upon him by his fans. This, too, is characteristic of Dylan. Dylan has consistently refused to play the role of selfobject, much to the irritation of his fans. No wonder they often felt betrayed and sold out.

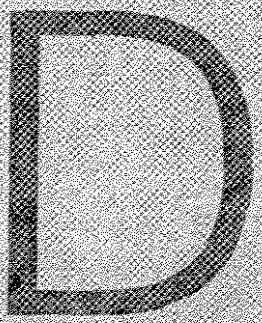
But perhaps this indifference to the idealizing tendencies of his audience is what also distinguishes Dylan from someone like Kurt Cobain. Dylan survives his idealization, and the impossible demands of fame, by refusing to be captive to the psychological needs of his admirers. "Trust yourself" is his advice to them.

Cobain, in contrast, appeared to embrace his role as idealized selfobject, and to embrace it with a certain earnestness. But no one can live up to idealization. The more one is idealized the more one is likely to disappoint. Perhaps this is why Cobain came to see himself as a failure, as an inauthentic fake and sell-out. Whereas Dylan was accused of being a sellout, Cobain accused himself. The violence of his self-condemnation, and its tragic result, is a caution to the heroized artists of popular culture.

"Go ahead now, entertain us" may, in fact, be the demand of fans who require heroes and selfobjects, but "What was it you wanted?" and "Trust yourself" must be the artistic response to the demand.

*Dan Lapsley is a teacher, a guide, a mentor, and most importantly a friend to many. Throughout my own friendship with him I have been aware of his penchant for bringing impressionable youths into the Dylan fold while conducting "Bob" seminars in his living room--replete with examples of Dylan's stage mannerisms, including his "six-string" pose, a swaying stance, low to the ground with neck hunched over, eyes closed, a pained expression on the face, and right arm doubling as a piston. However, I did not realize the true scope of his relationship with Dylan until I left it in this article, and until I read this article I was not sure why so many people looked up to Dan himself. I suppose it's because not all of us seek out our heroes from the worlds of music, sport, or art--some of us look up to the every day person, regardless of where they drew their value from.*
*-S.G.*

*Dr. Dan Lapsley is a developmental psychologist who has taught a course on Bob Dylan (Identity and Biography) at the University of Notre Dame, in South Bend, Indiana. His latest book, Moral Psychology (Westview Press), will appear in April.*



FAN: A WORD ORIGIN

THE MODERN WORSHIP OF SPORTS HEROES AND CELEBRITIES CAN BE TRACED BACK TO 1889 WHEN THE WORD WAS COINED IN ENGLISH FOR THE FIRST TIME. BEFORE THAT YOU COULDN'T BE A FAN, ONLY A FANATIC, WHICH IS WHAT THE WORD FAN IS SHORT FOR. UNLIKE FAN, WHICH ALMOST EVERYONE AT A BASEBALL GAME WOULD PROUDLY CALL THEMSELVES, THE WORD FANATIC HAS ALWAYS HAD A NEGATIVE CONNOTATION. THE FIRST OCCURRENCE OF THE WORD IS RECORDED AS A LOT OF SOURCES AGREE, FROM A SPEECH BY ROBERT HOWE—"FOOL, FANATICK, BARBARIAN"—WHO IS NEVER QUOTED FOR MORE THAN A SINGLE SENTENCE AT A TIME. IN ORDER TO FIND THE ORIGINAL SPEECH, THE RESEARCH TEAM HAD TO TRACK DOWN THE LATIN TEXTS, AND AT LAST THE ORIGINAL QUOTE WAS FOUND. HOWE THOUGHT HE WAS ADDRESSED AS ONE OF 10 DEVILS WHO HAUNTED HIS WORLD. OTHER OTHER WORDS IN THE SAME SPEECH WERE [illegible]