

So What Did I Know Then?

By Paul Edward Johnson

As an 18-year-old in 1959 I enrolled as a freshman at the University of Minnesota. I felt I could maybe become a high school music teacher and help kids sing and play instruments. All I had to do was pass the first of six music theory classes to demonstrate I had the skills and the talent to properly progress toward achieving my goal.

Well why not? During my senior year in high school I was president of my school choir.

We became famous for three weeks in December of 1958. All one-hundred-ten of us; soon after we had recorded "God's Christmas Tree" and the bouncy flip-side tune "Great Somebody" for Columbia Records.

Radio stations all across the nation broadcasted our "hit record" during the weeks leading up to Christmas. The only Christmas record that got more air time than ours was by The Chipmunks: "Christmas Don't Be Late."

And in high school I helped put together a dance band. We performed the music of Glenn Miller, Stan Kenton, Duke Ellington, and other big bands for high school and college dances. And we appeared "live" on three Minneapolis and St. Paul Bandstand TV shows, along with singers such as Bobby Vinton and Bobby Vee, who only lip synced their songs on those shows.

The agent for the Everly Brothers wanted us to tour with them as their "opening-act performers," before the Everly Brothers would then appear on the stage. But our parents wouldn't let us.

After my afternoon college classes, I'd head on over to a hole-in-a-wall beatnik coffee shop two blocks from the university campus, The 10 O'clock Scholar, where I would wear my French beret and sunglasses and stir a cinnamon stick in a cup of hot cider. I was "one hip beatnik cool cat."

The 10 O'clock Scholar featured singers who tended to perform depression-era folk tunes, such as the songs written and sung by Woody Guthrie.

During one afternoon, while stirring a cinnamon stick in my cup of hot cider, a scruffy skinny kid wandered into the coffee shop, carrying a beat-up guitar case.

He hopped upon the plywood performance platform next to the coffee shop's plate-glass window, opened his guitar case, and with guitar in hand, he slumped down upon a stool.

Maybe only three or four chords were all he strummed.

So I asked the shop's owner, as he refilled my cup of hot cider, "Who let *him* sit up on the platform?"

"I did. He's rehearsing for when he plays tonight."

"Here? Tonight? But he can't even tune his guitar."

And then the kid started singing.

"And he can't sing a lick. And I can't understand a word he's singing. You gotta be kidding me. He's the only guy you could find to play in here tonight?"

"He lives only a block away. On the corner. In a room. Above Gray's Drugstore. And always shows up on time. He's a freshman at the University. Just like you."

"But he looks like he's maybe only fifteen."

"Nope. Says he's eighteen."

I hopped off my stool at the counter and sauntered over to a chair at a table. In front of the platform. Thinking I might somehow understand the lyrics to the song he was slurring if I sat closer to him.

But, slouched on his stool, he kept singing with his head down, mumbling and whining what seemed to be a Woody Guthrie protest song; his guitar and his grating voice both out of tune, his feet persistently tapping upon the plywood platform.

When he finished singing and strumming, he glanced sideways, gazed up at the ceiling, and stared out the window; never once looking at me.

So I stood up and said, "What's your name? I'm Paul."

He said, "Robert. Some call me Bob. Or Bobby."

"Well Bob. It might help if you took guitar lessons. And some singing lessons, too. Maybe just several blocks from here. In the University Music Department. Where I'm now taking a music theory class."

He raised his head, smirked, pointed over his shoulder toward the plate-glass window, and said, "My name's plastered on that window because folks will come in here tonight and listen to me. Anyone listen to you?"

I failed my music theory class, chose to change my major from music to English, and while studying poetry, worked part-time within a record shop.

While sorting new albums into the shop's record bins, I saw a new Columbia Records album.

And again saw Bob smirking at me, on the album cover. Bob had changed his last name from Zimmerman to Dylan.