



VIEW*S* & VISIONS

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Our Perspectives on a Changing World

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Six days before Donald Trump was elected President of the United States, Bob Dylan ambled onto the stage of Charleston's Clay Center Auditorium. Eighteen hundred baby-boomers, a smattering of Gen Xers like me, and a few millennials here and there provided the recent Nobel laureate with the obligatory standing ovation as he stepped into the spotlight. Dylan approached the microphone, thinking about change.

He introduced himself as “[a] worried man with a worried mind / No one in front of me and nothing behind.” Dylan's thoughts grew darker and less optimistic from there. The next stanza saw Dylan: “Standing on the gallows with my head in a noose / Any minute now I'm expecting all hell to break loose.” Then, in the refrain, the radical defiance my parents first heard in 1964 on the album *The Times They Are A-Changin'* surrendered to resignation and defeat:

*People are crazy and times are strange
I'm locked in tight, I'm out of range
I used to care, but things have changed*

Dylan had the blues that November night. We sensed it. And the audience had the blues, too. The plush seats, pre-show cocktails, and familiar tunes couldn't help us escape the troubling news of the year: an increasingly ugly presidential campaign with overtones of Russian interference. Nukes in North Korea. Religious persecution in

Syria. Refugees. Brexit. Police cruiser videos highlighting the racial tensions and murders we pretend not to see.

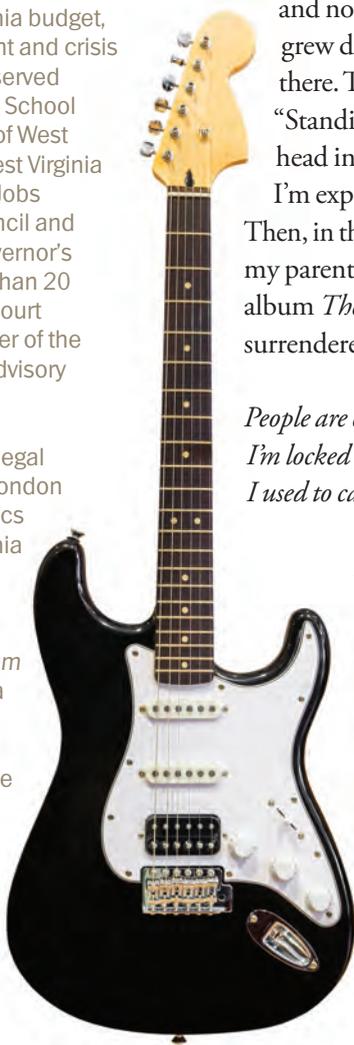
Regardless of political affiliation, we craved positive news. We wanted an entertaining night out and for the election to be over. Instead we got:

*I've been walking forty miles of bad road
If the Bible is right, the world will explode
I've been trying to get as far away from myself as I can*

Perhaps a set opener like *Things Have Changed* is not a bellwether of what's going on in the artist's mind; it's simply a good tune, an icebreaker to warm up the audience. Moreover, when it comes to the inscrutable Dylan, one only can speculate on whether he intends for the symbols in old lyrics to speak new truths to current events.

But on that night Bob Dylan's resigned stance was clear to me from the get-go. He confirmed my suspicions with the other songs he played: *It's All Over Now, Baby Blue*; *High Water* (“It's bad out there / High water everywhere”); *Lonesome Day Blues*; *Melancholy Mood* (cover); *Desolation Row*; *Long and Wasted Years*; and *Autumn Leaves* (another cover).

Eight years earlier – on Election Night 2008 – Dylan's mood was more optimistic. It appeared Barack Obama – whose campaign slogan had been one word, “Change” – would be elected president. While onstage at the University of Minnesota, Dylan halted his show to say a few words about the historic presidency: “I was born in 1941 – that's the year they bombed Pearl Harbor. Well, I been living in a world of darkness ever since. But it looks like things are gonna change now.”





Henry Thoreau, my favorite American thinker and writer, probably would be amused by Dylan’s focus on “things” changing for good or ill. Near the end of his masterpiece *Walden*, Thoreau remarks that, “Things do not change; we change.” He offers this observation in connection with counseling the reader against acquiring new things, whether they be clothes or friends. Thoreau encourages self-reflection, simplifying one’s lifestyle, and focusing on individual improvement rather than changing outside circumstances.

Certainly, Thoreau would acknowledge that “things,” like nature, law, and technology, indeed do change. But he’d argue it’s our attitude toward change – how we cope with change – that’s what’s important. As Thoreau asserts in *Walden*, “[h]owever mean your life is, meet it and live it; do not shun it and call it hard names. It is not so bad as you are.”

Thoreau recognized wars, class divisions, and injustice – like the revolution of the seasons – will exist always. We cannot change these truths. What we can change, however, is our attitudes in coping with these problems. As individuals, as Americans, our perspectives on the changing world matter. We’ve got to increase our personal political engagement, make change and, in the process, guard against becoming jaded.

I’m glad Bob Dylan played to a packed-house of baby-boomers on November 2, 2016, rather than to an audience of millennials. Not because Dylan played poorly (quite the contrary; it was the best performance we’d seen him give in years), but because he projected a man worn out by the changing world instead of being

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excited by it. Millennials need optimism. They still care. Their grassroots campaigns, marches, and fundraising drives – and their effective use of technology – demonstrate they’re excited about contributing positively to a changing world. Their actions carry the defiant spirit of those tunes Bob Dylan wrote in the 1960s, back when he had the fire. Back before age and disappointments changed him and other baby-boomers. Back before he started playing standards from the past, like the one he sang to close his show: *Why Try to Change Me Now*. ▾