

On the Road
For September 2009

My road last month covered Texas from Colleyville in the North to Corpus Christi in the South, with Round Rock, Grand Prairie, Corsicana and Hearne in between. I was following the trail of the Bob Dylan Show which also featured Willie Nelson and John Cougar Mellencamp. I was also visiting David and Annabel Pillow in Colleyville, taking son Clayton to a concert, letting Belle Starr tell her story at the Pearce Museum in Corsicana, and helping a friend get to Hearne. All in one week! What fun....the day in Colleyville with my parents, on Saturday, August 8, was a day of rest and sharing family stories, many about me as a young, aspiring, shape-shifting woman road warrior."

First, The Bob Dylan show. Since I went to three concerts, something I had planned as a summer excursion since I first heard about the tour of ball parks, I am filled with comparisons. The thread tying them together was my own passionate response to seeing Bob Dylan on stage, in his latest incarnation(s)!

The Willie Nelson show called me to remember; the Mellencamp show invited me to dance; the Bob Dylan finale reminded me that shapeshifting is alive and well. I do it; Bob does it. Presumptuous to identify with him? I think not. His long history with the American culture indicates that many continue to identify in some way. I listen to his songs, old and new, traditional and revised, fast and slow, rich and real, and I find myself not only feeling each song in every cell of my body, but also thinking about what really matters in the long run. Dylan addresses what matters.

When Dylan is running across the high plain as the wolf in his soul, he howls his songs into the ears of his listening crowd. His owl-like perch on the limb brings out the wisdom we all want. He stalks a song like a Panther, then delivers it as he shifts into a hawk flying away (and at this moment in the writing, a friend who understands shapeshifting calls me). And then there is his delivery, changing from night to night, from song to song.

"Forgetful Heart" was the highlight for me, delivered in low light on the stage in Round Rock, my first concert in the Texas series. Dylan stepped up to the microphone and "gave" us this song as a gift. My other experiences at Dylan concerts did not include this kind of delivery, but rather a man performing in some space of isolation as his band delivered the tight rock and roll. I was touched, moved and inspired by this "shape," Dylan connecting with us and telling us what he saw....straight from his heart to my heart. I wonder if anyone else felt this.

Checking www.expectingrain.com, I found many other perspectives on the tour. Most agreed that Bob was at his most interactive; most saw the standards as rich and the new songs as sometimes unavailable; some saw the shape shifting and expressed interest or ennui. Remember, at the June YRC in Monterey, we had a luncheon speaker talk on "Transnational Bob," and I've been listening to Bob Dylan since my college days in Ft. Worth, Texas, 1063-1967. I first heard Willie Nelson at Panther Hall in Ft. Worth in 1963.

Willie's show each night was predictable, full of his jazz guitar leads, his talk of family and the band, his range of hits from "Crazy" to "Night Life" to "Still is Still Moving To Me," that last one being my all-time Willie Nelson favorite. Guess it touches me where I live....on the dance floor where stars are born. That vague allusion is to Nietzsche,

“Chaos gives birth to dancing stars.” Willie and Nietzsche.....an interesting pair. I’ll save that for the next academic paper.

In Grand Prairie, son Clayton suggested we head to the bus. I had avoided that attempt at the previous two shows. We saw Willie’s bus parked nearby so I took his suggestion. Clayton has read every word of Patoski’s book on the epic life of Willie Nelson (a gift from his mom;) and has many years experience at the Kerrville Folk Festival where Texas songwriters are revered. Our good time included chatting with Tony, the night driver, LG, a manager, Lana, the daughter who takes care of dad, and a final hug from Sister Bobbie as she headed toward the stage. Family sharing family.

Our surprise came when Miriam Straum walked by. I had noticed her taking over the stage with her violin performance on the Mellencamp portion of the show. My new hero...a woman with a powerful presence. Meeting her at this last concert for me was a thrill, and then, as we stood acknowledging each other, I found out she had played the Kerrville Folk Festival in a group called “Eelectricity.” How’s that for synchronicity?? I did love dancing to Mellencamp, and I loved watching Miriam play “rock” violin.

One of the highlights of my own tour of ball parks included the audiences joining both Willie and Mellencamp on favorite songs, a sing along around the community experience. “Ain’t That America,” and “On The Road Again” invited thousands to join in song. I loved the audiences, representing all ages from the baby in the stroller, to the toddler astride dad’s neck, to the grandparent pointing out Willie or Dylan to a child, and to young lovers holding hands. I was standing behind one such family when the daughter asked, “Why can’t we talk with Bob Dylan?” I could have told her. Never happens at a concert.

A young man beside me in Grand Prairie said, “I have never heard Bob live, but I’ve been listening to him a long time. My dad loves the old stuff; I love the new songs. WE both listen.” We all made room for the 11-year-old who wanted to be closer to the stage. I moved closer and closer through the three concerts I attended, ending up three people from the stage at Grand Prairie.

When Willie or John or Bob came out, all hands went up in the air, many holding cell phones for shots. No way to keep the small cameras away at these concerts. I have my collection of shots, most quite blurry from the dancing lights. I loved the backdrop when Dylan played “Highway 61” at Round Rock with special guest Charlie Sexton! The backdrop was filled with streaks of light pulsing and throbbing with the music. I felt, for a moment, as if some kind of birth was happening. A womb-like image came over me. Was it the birth of a dancing star?

Yes, I said Charlie Sexton, Little Charlie Sexton, who toured with Dylan for about a year. Dylan seemed pleased to play with him, and Charlie did bring an energy to the stage lacking in the other shows. I love Dylan’s band, including long-time band leader Tony Garnier on bass and Denny Freeman, Austin player, on lead guitar. Charlie added more than just talent; Dylan seemed to light up when he came out on stage. And the Austin crowd went wild.

I read about the Lubbock show where police took people out of the arena. The three shows I saw were family shows in the context of carnival....all about feeling good and strutting. Willie showed up in black, tossing out hats to his audience. Mellencamp wore the black vest and white shirt each night. And Dylan changed from black suit with short jacket and red shirt to black suit with yellow shirt and matching yellow stripe down the

pants leg. Always the white southern gambler's hat with the cigarette roll on the edge. His band always wore the cool hats, sometimes light, sometimes dark.

As I look back over the years at photos, Dylan has always been aware of his visual impact, going from working lad, to mod stylist, to dashing swing player with a pencil-thin moustache. As a costume queen myself, I loved the combination of visual with aural.

Here are some words from the three troubadours to all of us, terrific words that I want to share with you: "I feel a change coming on; I'm burning, still yearning; Angel flying too close to the ground; still is still moving to me; on the road again; dream burned up like paper and fire; watching the river flow; Isn't no use to sit and wonder why, babe; living in the land of nod; something's happening here; the world has gone black before my eyes; how does it feel to be on your own, with no direction home, like a rolling stone? And more, so many more words.

I saw Dylan lean into the microphone as I've never seen him move before. He bounced with some kind of joy, smiling some at the band from behind the keyboard. And once he kicked out that left leg and rocked with the music. Coming from a place of new energy, perhaps, Bob Dylan flew back to the stage and regained his shape at the end of each concert.

I drove home, knowing I would forever feel those songs, remember those evenings, and dream new dreams. Thanks to Willie, John, and Bob!

Ahead in September is a full month for the Texas Heritage Music Foundation, a dream I manifested in 1987 here in Kerrville...inspired by the warmth of Willie and the many shapes of Dylan! The dream is still alive because many, many people have supported this dream, resulting in free educational programming that not only occurs on Friday, Sept. 25, but also throughout the year since a grant from the Peterson Foundation allows the Bard Project to send musicians into the schools. All about another way of learning with stories and songs.

Many local organizations have accepted our invitation to participate on September 25, including Conjunto Taller (San Antonio), Museum of Western Art, Many Hats with Peg Hainey, Daughter's of the Republic, Institute of Texas Cultures (San Antonio), Sunrise Lions Club (major volunteers who manage parking and the site), Archeology Association of Kerrville, and many more! The September event has become a community event sharing out history through stories and songs. Still time to get involved so call me! 830-792-1945. Wanda Selby called and now helps manage the THMF office! I am grateful.

September 2 is the first coffeehouse at Schreiner University, paying tribute to Hispanic Heritage Month. Terri Sharp will open the show, after an open mike featuring student work. Joel Guzman and Sarah Fox are the featured guests, touring behind a new album called "Conjuntazzo." Joel calls it "Conjunto Americana," pointing to the rich mixture of styles. Come out to Schreiner at the Cailloux Student Center from 7-9 on the first Wednesday of September, October, and November to enjoy this series presented by THMF and Center for Innovative Learning at Schreiner University.

If you read this magazine soon enough, you will also find out that the Kerrville Wine and Music Festival runs over Labor Day Weekend, featuring Max Baca and The Texmaniacs on Friday night, September 4. Max, Speedy Vee and David Farias have a new album, "Borders and Bailes," with Smithsonian Folkway Records preserving the true Conjunto sounds of our Texas heritage. Max is considered legendary on the Bajo Sexto,

and I heard Max and David recently at the Conjunto Festival produced by Conjunto Taller (also coming to the Sept. 25 Living History Day).

Karen Abrahams, a chapter in my book on the women of Texas music, brings her soulful performance, rocking with blues as well, to the stage on Friday night. See the website for full lineup and websites for all the artists.....too long a list to write about here!

Have to mention one CD that has been in my car as I travel up and down the road: "Cotton," the third in a trilogy by Sam Baker. The first two stunning productions, both housed in stark white covers, are called "Mercy," and "Pretty World." I loved them both, and they told stories of characters from other places and times. As I listened to each story, I realized the timelessness of his characters as well. I know them NOW. "Cotton" seems to look at forgiveness and the cost of not forgiving, even as each story asks us to inquire within and look at ourselves. I like that. Sam says, "Life is beautiful, difficult, terrible, and transcendent. Each of us is part and parcel of one great community, one great pretty world that reaches back in time before recall and reaches forward beyond imagination. We are love. We are hope. We are stories." I wish I had said that in that way, and I do say it over and over in my own way.

Time to bring this road trip to an end, as I start back up in the classroom at Schreiner University. I understand the open mike at the Guadalupe River Club in Kerrville is a happening scene. I know Fredericksburg keeps the Hill Country Rocking, along with Luckenbach, Alamo Springs Café, Bandera clubs, and Pipe Creek...to mention a few. See www.hill-country-visitor.com for a complete calendar of the area.

And Jim Leavell, owner, has added sections of video footage, including my own space for a short conversation! If you are a musician reading this, contact me with your story. If you are a music aficionado, contact me as well. Let's keep creating a community where stories and songs make a difference. I would love to come share my story with your group (as I have with Lion's and Rotary and Unitarian Fellowship). Call me. 830-792-1945.