

DYLAN IN THE POOL

Because I am of a certain age, when I think of cool -- who's cool, what does cool mean? -- Bob Dylan is the person who comes first to mind.

For my generation, he was it. A guy who had none of the usual requirements to make an impact in the world. He was tiny. He was kind of homely. He came from an inauspicious part of the country. By most definitions of singing, he couldn't even sing.

But he embodied the cool of his angry, spoiled age. Flinty, distant, clever beyond belief. He was James Dean with staying power. Men wanted to slink down the street the way he did; women wanted to pop him into a sack and take him home. I know, he was egotistical and churlish and pointlessly obscure, as well. But in these attitudes we -- the boys and girls of my generation -- saw great opportunities for ourselves. Because of him, we could be cooler, less vulnerable. So we very intelligently gave him a pass for being the way he was.

He had, above all, that post-existential stance about him that asked, Who are you to judge me? If you have a copy of his album *Blonde on Blonde* in your den, go dig it out, or fix it in my your mind right now, and think about his face and all it meant to us at that that, and all it still says today. His sense of superiority. His rage at past mistreatment, which would never be repeated. His determination to define himself at all costs.

OK, that's Bob Dylan in 1967. I want you now to fast-forward to 1976, when word began to trickle out that Dylan, who had been stumbling through a fallow period, had converted to Christianity. Indeed, the rumor was that he had been baptized, this king of cool, in the Hollywood swimming pool of Pat Boone.

This rumor turned out to be untrue, but the image -- and the horror at Dylan's humiliation -- persists.

It should not have been such a surprise. The careful listener could discern as far back as Dylan's earliest records that Gospel music and the Bible and grandiose thoughts about God and justice and sin, were always bound up in his songs. He was never a

“Sixties pleasure-seeker.” He was always something else – more thoughtful, more roots-oriented, and fundamentally more religious.

Still, there he is. And if he did not undergo an excruciating baptism in Boone’s pool, it is certain he was forced to endure things more excruciating – his pillorying in Rolling Stone and other hip places, the feeling by many fans that he had flipped, or sold out.

It is hard to come up with a conversion story that makes you teeth itch as much as Bob Dylan’s, and I have wondered why that is. Why does it bother me, Mike Finley, to think of my onetime cool idol reduced to such embarrassing circumstances?

And the answer is that I see myself standing in that kidney-shaped pool, with the Mulholland Drive sunlight glimmering about me. I feel the misery of being brought low to Jesus, and having to deny everything I thought I was, and everything I had ever bragged about.

And worse, I feel the weight of having to please, from that moment on, all the good people who helped me reach this state of humiliation. Because, God help us, Bob Dylan is never going to be a good Christian boy in the sense we understand. He’s not going to be a Tennessee Ernie Ford. He’s going to let people down – and he did.

And this misery (and this mystery) of the clever heart is the thing I want to explore.