Tonight as I Stand Inside the Rain:
Bob Dylan and Weather Imagery

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Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society, in press

July, 2004
Revised August, 2004; October, 2004

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I became a Bob Dylan fan in 1966 as a freshman at the University of Wisconsin the first time I heard him, listening to his second album *Freewheelin’* played on my friend Gene Sherman’s record player (an ancient device in which a plastic disk with modulated grooves spins on a platter at a frequency of 33.33 min⁻¹ (0.5556 s⁻¹) and a stylus transfers the physical undulations into electrical signals). I attended my first Dylan concert (with The Band) at the Boston Garden in 1974 while a graduate student, and recently attended my 36th Dylan concert in Washington, DC. When friends find out about my passion for the music of Dylan, I often get reactions like “He can’t sing.” or “Why do you like him so much?” As I have thought about how to address these responses over the years, I have come to realize that there are many reasons, but the one of the most important ones is the way he uses weather imagery in his songs.

As a meteorologist, I love to see how Dylan describes the weather so poetically and how weather imagery is connected to feelings, especially about love and politics. So the purpose of writing this essay, my fellow meteorologists, is to acquaint the younger readers among you with this wonderful body of work (and to remind the older ones of you) in the hope that I can share the pleasure I get from Bob Dylan with you, and that you will be able to expand your appreciation for the atmosphere by sharing its reflection in this art.

Many years ago, *BAMS* published a verse of Joni Mitchell’s song, *Both Sides Now*, (“I’ve looked at clouds from both sides now ...I really don’t know clouds at all”) to show how art and science can complement each other (although the writer of the song was incorrectly identified as John Mitchell). Thirty years ago in *BAMS*, J. Neumann discussed land and sea breezes in Greek literature and G. L. Siscoe compiled quotes from Mark Twain on weather. Two years ago, I accomplished one of my lifelong goals of publishing a paper with a Dylan quote as a title (“Blowin’ in the wind: Research priorities for climate effects of volcanic eruptions,” in *EOS*, 83:472). More recently, Graeme Stephens wrote an essay in *American Scientist* on clouds and art. These reminded me that it was time for this essay.

I love Dylan’s songs for the poetry; the music, especially when he plays the harmonica; the politics of freedom and opposition to oppression, violence, and war; the humor; the singing, as it conveys so much feeling and makes the listener pay attention; and the emphasis on feelings (a necessary counterpoint to a scientist’s focus on facts).

I could write about each of these. But I also love the weather and climate imagery, and, while many, many books are devoted to the poetry and music of Bob Dylan, I know of none that address the weather imagery; hence this paper. Dylan has used weather imagery throughout his career. A visit to the lyric search engine at http://bobdylan.com finds that out of approximately 465 total Dylan songs, the word “sun” is found in 63 different ones, “wind” in 55, “rain” in 40, “sky” in 36, “cloud” in 23, “storm” in 14, “summer” in 12, “snow” in 11, and fewer numbers of “weather,” “hail,” “winter,” “fall,” “spring,” “hurricane,” “lightning,” “thunder,” “wave,” “breeze,” and “flood.” Of course, it would be impossible to present all these examples here, and I invite you to search for your own favorite weather or climate term, read the lyrics, and listen to a sample of the song. Here I
will simply give a flavor of the richness available by discussing my two favorite weather songs and giving examples from others.

**Blowin’ in the Wind (1962)**

The most famous Dylan weather quote is probably, “The answer, my friend, is blowin’ in the wind. The answer is blowin’ in the wind.” In the song, “blowin’ in the wind” is the answer to nine questions, such as “How many times must the cannon balls fly, before they’re forever banned?” What does “blowin’ in the wind” mean in this context? I am not sure. But the wonderful thing about Dylan’s words is that they can mean many different things to different people or to the same people at different (or the same) times. I used the above quote in the frontpiece of my Ph.D. dissertation in 1977 to indicate the chaotic nature of atmospheric circulation and how natural variability could be an important part of climate change.

More recently, in searching for a Dylan quote for my summary of the AGU Chapman conference I organized in Santorini in 2002 on the subject of volcanism and the Earth’s atmosphere I realized that “blowin’ in the wind” could refer to volcanic emissions into the atmosphere and their subsequent impacts. Although I have been listening to this song repeatedly for more than 40 yr, and have thought of many other meanings to these words, this particular meaning was new to me. I look forward to the many additional meanings I will get from the song in the future.

Another of the questions in this song is “How many times must a man look up, before he can see the sky?” I tell all my new undergraduate students (women and men) to look up every time they go outside, really study what they see, and try to explain what they see in terms of what they are learning about thermodynamics or clouds or optics. When Dylan does the same thing, however, it connects him to his feelings about relationships or politics. I do not think of Dylan as a weatherman, but as someone who uses the weather to express his feelings. He makes no pretenses of being a scientist – only an artist and poet. I try to see the sky all the time, and *Blowin’ in the Wind* helps to remind me to do it.

**Chimes of Freedom (1964)**

*Chimes of Freedom* is the most wonderful, poetic description of a thunderstorm that I know of. It begins,

“Far between sundown’s finish an’ midnight’s broken toll
We ducked inside a doorway thunder crashing,”

already conveying the preferential time of day for severe thunderstorm development. It goes on to switch the senses, hearing lightning and seeing thunder, to emphasize the emotional impact, and uses this dramatic natural light show to signal a call for righting some of the wrongs in the world:

“As majestic bells of bolts struck shadows in the sounds
Seeming to be the chimes of freedom flashing
Flashing for the warriors whose strength is not to fight
Flashing for the refugees on the unarmed road of flight
An’ for each an’ ev’ry underdog soldier in the night
An’ we gazed upon the chimes of freedom flashing....”

Later,

“Through the mad mystic hammering of the wild ripping hail
The sky cracked its poems in naked wonder”

Dylan really knows how to describe severe weather.
The song contains another magical description of the storm ending:

“Even though a cloud's white curtain in a far-off corner flared
An’ the hypnotic splattered mist was slowly lifting
Electric light still struck like arrows
Fired but for the ones
Condemned to drift or else be kept from drifting”

After the thunderstorm was over:

“Starry-eyed an’ laughing as I recall when we were caught
Trapped by no track of hours for they hanged suspended
As we listened one last time an’ we watched with one last look
Spellbound an’ swallowed 'til the tolling ended”

Doesn’t this express our fascination with severe weather as well as is humanly possible?

**Other Weather Quotes**

There are many, many examples of weather poetry in Dylan’s music. Here I give some of my favorites. When I indicate the subject of each song, of course I only give the most obvious interpretation, and there are always other ways to react. These examples also illustrate the way he uses weather to express feelings, humor, and politics. On the subject of winter and, of course, of lost love:

“Well, if you go when the snowflakes storm
When the rivers freeze and summer ends
Please see if she’s wearing a coat so warm
To keep her from the howling winds...
So if you're travelin' in the North Country fair,
Where the winds hit heavy on the borderline,
Remember me to one who lives there.
She once was a true love of mine.” (*Girl of the North Country*, 1963)
Again on the subject of winter, with a dash of humor:

“Clouds so swift
Rain won’t lift
Gate won’t close
Railings froze
Get your mind off wintertime
You ain’t goin’ nowhere.” (You Ain’t Goin’ Nowhere, 1967)

When I wrote a review of A Path Where No Man Thought: Nuclear Winter and the End of the Arms Race, by Carl Sagan and Rich Turco (Robock, 1991), I searched for a Dylan song for a quote to start the article. I realized that the following could be directly interpreted as being about nuclear winter, and included it in the first draft, but unfortunately the editor removed it from the final version of the article. I don’t know if Dylan had nuclear winter in mind when he wrote this, but it seemed like it to me.

“We live in a political world,
Love don’t have any place.
We’re living in times where men commit crimes
And crime don’t have a face.
We live in a political world,
Icicles hanging down,
Wedding bells ring and angels sing,
clouds cover up the ground....
We live in a political world
Where peace is not welcome at all,
It’s turned away from the door to wander some more
Or put up against the wall.” (Political World, 1989)

The following could just as well apply to the tropics. It sums up my feelings upon returning from two years in the Peace Corps in the Philippines to start graduate school in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In the Fall of 1972, I derived great pleasure from experiencing seasons again, and the song was written in the same year. On the subject of seasons:

“San Francisco is fine.
You sure get lots of sun.
But I’m used to four seasons,
California’s got but one.” (California, 1972)

I chose the next quote as the title for this article. We all get rained on, but only Dylan can so wonderfully describe the experience with a scale transformation. On experiencing rain:

“Tonight as I stand inside the rain” (Just Like a Woman, 1966)
I always tell students that “bad weather” is a value judgment. Rain is only bad if it spoils your outdoor plans or is too severe, but farmers need rain, and during dry spells, rain is “good weather.” Many of us meteorologists like severe weather, and get excited by experiencing and forecasting it. So consider the next quote as either the cry of someone afraid of a storm, more metaphorically someone upset about their situation in life, or the exultation of a meteorologist who wishes she had turned to our science when she was younger. On “bad” weather:

“And yer sky cries water and yer drain pipe’s a-pourin’
And the lightnin’s a-flashing and the thunder’s a-crashin’
And the windows are rattlin’ and breakin’ and the roof tops a-shakin’
And yer whole world’s a-slammin’ and bangin’
And yer minutes of sun turn to hours of storm
And to yourself you sometimes say
‘I never knew it was gonna be this way
Why didn't they tell me the day I was born?’"
(Last Thoughts on Woody Guthrie, 1973)

If only current weather conditions were expressed this way on radio reports:

“The wind howls like a hammer,
The night blows cold and rainy” (Love Minus Zero/No Limit, 1965)

I wish TV forecasters would express their forecasts like this:

“So take heed, take heed of the western wind,
Take heed of the stormy weather.” (Boots of Spanish Leather, 1963)

Next time after a busted forecast, know that Dylan feels your pain:

“I thought it would rain but the clouds passed by
Now I feel like I'm coming to the end of my way”
(Til I Fell in Love With You, 1997)

One of the most common themes in Dylan’s music is love, both experiencing it and losing it. In this selection, he uses weather and the seasons to express love. I wish I could be so romantic.

“If not for you
My sky would fall,
Rain would gather too.
Without your love I’d be nowhere at all,
Oh! What would I do
If not for you?
If not for you,
Winter would have no spring,
Couldn’t hear the robin sing,
I just wouldn’t have a clue,
Anyway it wouldn't ring true,
If not for you.” (If Not for You, 1970)

We know that one of the main problems in calculating climate sensitivity is the strength of cloud feedbacks. It seems that Dylan realized that 40 yr ago:

“I stood unwound beneath the skies
And clouds unbound by laws.
The cryin’ rain like a trumpet sang
And asked for no applause.” (Lay Down Your Weary Tune, 1964)

Of course, I have just presented Bob Dylan’s words, and their poetry is much more powerful when you hear him sing the songs. If you can’t attend a concert on his Neverending Tour (about 100 performances per yr for the past 17 yr), I recommend buying his albums. While I am still not sure whether I agree that “You don’t need a weather man to know which way the wind blows” (Figure 1; Subterranean Homesick Blues, 1965), I am sure that you’ll be “on the highway of regret” (Make You Feel My Love, 1997) if you don’t follow Bob Dylan’s advice to “Come you ladies and you gentlemen, a-listen to my song.” (Hard Times in New York Town, 1962).

Acknowledgments. I would like to express my thanks to my Dylan buddies in the meteorological world with whom I have shared Bob Dylan concerts, Mike Fennessy and Pasha Groisman, to my wife, Sherri West, who has accompanied me to 15 Dylan shows, and to D. A. Pennebaker for permission to use images from Don’t Look Back in Figure 1. This work is supported by the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station.
For Further Reading

[Each Bob Dylan song is listed by the name of the song and the year it was written.]

The most comprehensive Dylan Web site is http://expectingrain.com/.


Figure Caption

Figure 1. Bob Dylan expressing his respect for meteorology, from Don’t Look Back (1965), a film by D. A. Pennebaker, used with permission. As the film opens, Dylan uses cue cards to illustrate his performance of Subterranean Homesick Blues (1965).
Figure 1