

## “TONIGHT AS I STAND INSIDE THE RAIN”

### Bob Dylan and Weather Imagery

BY ALAN ROBOCK

I became a Bob Dylan fan in 1966 as a freshman at the University of Wisconsin—Madison the first time I heard him, listening to his second album, *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*, 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  $33.33 \text{ min}^{-1}$  ( $0.556 \text{ s}^{-1}$ ) and a stylus transfers the physical undulations into electrical signals]. I attended my first Dylan concert (he played with The Band) at the Boston Garden in 1974 while a graduate student and recently attended my

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



36th Dylan concert in Washington, D.C. 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 one of the most important ones is the way in which 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 (and to remind the older ones of) this wonderful body of work 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, the *Bulletin* 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 the *Bulletin*, 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*, vol. 83, p. 472). More recently, Graeme Stephens wrote an essay in *American Scientist* (2003, p. 442–449) 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, because it conveys so much feeling and makes the listener pay attention;

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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 online at [www.bobdylan.com](http://www.bobdylan.com) finds that out of approximately 465 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, and “snow” in 11, with 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 hint of the richness that is 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 cannonballs 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 front piece 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 American Geophysical Union Chapman Conference, which I organized in Santorini, Greece, in 2002 on the subject of volcanism and the Earth's atmosphere, I realized that “blowin' in the wind” could apply to volcanic emissions into the atmosphere and their subsequent impacts. Although I have been listening to this song repeatedly for more than 40 years 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, 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 of which I am aware. 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.

Does this not 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 are 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  
in which he uses weather to express feelings, humor,  
and politics. The following is on the subject of win-  
ter and, of course, 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

## NOTES FROM ANOTHER DYLAN FAN

BY GUIDO VISCONTI

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Our colleague, Francesco Cairo, upon hearing Alan Robock play "Tombstone Blues" (1965) on his computer while they were both working in McMurdo Station, Antarctica, told him that I used a line from that song in the Italian edition of my book, *Fundamentals of Physics and Chemistry of the Atmosphere*, which starts with the quote,

Now I wish I could write a melody so plain  
That could hold you dear lady from going insane  
That could ease you and cool you and cease the pain  
Of your useless and pointless knowledge.

I was very glad when, through Francesco, Alan Robock immediately sent me a preprint of his lovely piece on the weather imagery in the lyrics of Bob Dylan. With such a massive body of work as that of Dylan, it is necessary to make hard and painful choices of what to include for discussion, but still there are a few things that I wish had been included, and Alan kindly invited me to mention them here.

There are at the least two other songs that have "wind" in their title: "Caribbean Wind" (1985) and "Idiot Wind" (1975). Both are very personal songs and see the wind as a way to transport feelings; for example, "Idiot wind, blowing through the flowers on your tomb." Even if Dylan knows what trade winds are ("And them Caribbean winds still blow from Nassau to Mexico/Fanning the flames in the furnace of desire"), in a particular version of this song (as Dylan performed it 12 November 1980 at the Fox Warfield Theater in San Francisco, California), the general circulation is not correct: "And that Caribbean wind still howls from Tokyo to the British Isles."

It is rather uncomfortable to discuss the political implications of many of the Dylan songs, as confirmed by the little space Alan gave to the line from "Subterranean Homesick Blues": "You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows." This verse expresses a very deep thought on science, "Is science what scientists do or is

science made by scientists?" which one finds asked, for instance, in the book by evolutionary geneticist Richard Lewontin and colleagues, *Not in Our Genes: Biology, Ideology and Human Nature* (Pantheon, 1985). In addition, a radical, violent branch of the Students for a Democratic Society, led by Mark Rudd at Columbia University, took the name Weathermen in the late 1960s, inspired by this line.

When Alan talks about nuclear winter, he could have also used a perfect excerpt from "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" (1963):

I've stumbled on the side of twelve misty mountains  
I've walked and I've crawled on six crooked highways,  
I've stepped in the middle of seven sad forests,  
I've been out in front of a dozen dead oceans,  
I've been ten thousand miles in the mouth of a graveyard.

And atmospheric imagery serves as an astounding prophecy of the New York terrorist attack in *Mississippi* (2001): "Sky full of fire, pain pouring down." It is ironic that this song was on his last album, *Love and Theft*, which was released on 11 September 2001. This is also one of his best albums, showing that—unlike most other singers who have had such long careers—he can still create great art.

As Alan has mentioned, weather images in Dylan's songs are plentiful and always beautiful, conveying deep emotions and sentiments; for example, "The wind it was howlin' and the snow was outrageous" ("Isis," 1976), and "There's a wicked wind still blowin' on that upper deck" ("Señor," 1978). One could go on forever.

I am also a great Dylan fan, but I think that following his simple philosophy one should not overstate him. Yet I would like to end my comment extending the Dylan competence also to climate: "Put your hand on my head, baby, do I have a temperature?! I see people who are supposed to know better standin' around like furniture" ("The Groom's Still Waiting at the Altar," 1981).

Is this the situation for global warming?

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 from the North Country," 1963

Again on the subject of winter, Dylan sings, 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 in 1991 a review of *A Path Where No Man Thought: Nuclear Winter and the End of the Arms Race*, by Carl Sagan and Rich Turco, 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 do not 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, Dylan sings:

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: "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, or, 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:

And yer sky cries water and yer drain pipe's a-pourin'  
And the lightning'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 in 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 years 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 cannot attend a concert on his Never-ending Tour (about 100 performances per year for the past 17 years), 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" (Fig. 1; "Subterranean

Homesick Blues," 1965), I am sure that you will be "on the highway of regret" ("Make You Feel My Love," 1997) if you do not follow Bob Dylan's advice to "Come you ladies and you gentlemen, a-listen to my song" ("Hard Times in New York Town," 1962).

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## FOR FURTHER READING

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