Mud on the Tiles

By Brett Aronowitz

There was a lot of activity at our house in New Jersey's Berkeley Heights with guests coming and going all the time. The house had a tiny walk-thru kitchen with a white ersatz tile floor. It seemed that there was an inextricable connection between the washing and waxing of that floor, and Bob Dylan's arrival.

Bob never struck me as a particularly kid-friendly sort of guy. He was indifferent to my brothers and me, and much more interested in himself. On the heels of his arrival would also be the mud on his cowboy boots.

Just because I remember the way Bob infuriated my mother, doesn't mean anyone else would've ever noticed. She was too busy being cool. She was a gracious hostess with clever practicality. She'd add as many eggs, and as much breadcrumbs as it took, to turn a pound of chopped chuck into hamburgers for ten unexpected guests.

It didn't matter what time Bob arrived. Even if she'd worked hard preparing a full meal she was about to serve, he'd head straight for the kitchen. I can remember him standing there in his muddy cowboy boots, with the refrigerator door open, peering inside trying to figure out what he wanted to eat, while my mother would quietly storm off. I could tell she was pissed.

I guess his brilliance and charisma appealed to my parents, or at least my father. They'd put up with his behavior. As for me, I'd thought he was an intruder.

When he'd come over they'd all stay up long past my bedtime, and it was hard for me to fall asleep with all the laughing going on down the hall. In the morning, I'd awake to a very, very dark room. My parents had made sure to pull down shades that kept the light out, and close the curtains. My bedroom door was shut when I'd insisted that my parents leave it open. I figured Bob might be asleep in the extra bed in my room, but I couldn't actually see him until I'd opened the door, letting a little light filter in. Sometimes my mom and dad would warn me that I'd be sharing my room. Most times it was a surprise.

Either way, no one had ever asked me if I'd wanted to share my room. On these mornings, I'd have to slip quietly out the door and play somewhere else in the house.

Those long nights hanging out with Dylan were my Dad's fixes for the same magic drug I'd later become addicted to. Creativity! It was a thrill to see words come together as writing. It was a thrill to watch an idea become a song.

Dylan had written "Mr. Tambourine Man" in our house. Over the years, I'd heard the story told so many times that when Bob said he'd written it in New Orleans, I laughed.

After all, it's more romantic to imagine him on a sultry night in a bar in the French quarter with Cajun music in the background, rather than in a three bedroom house in New Jersey in the middle of the night, eating a tuna fish sandwich, smoking cigarettes, what he'd called Turkish tobacco, (which was really pot), and listening to Marvin Gaye's, "Can I Get a Witness?" over and over again.

Bob Dylan must've done something creative while he was at our house, or my parents would've gotten as sick of him as I did.

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