Among the many remarkable features of “Like a Rolling Stone” is the fact that the song with which Dylan cracked the pop charts was one of unremitting spitefulness. Having done so once, he had a stab at the same thing twice more within a few months, releasing “Positively 4th Street” in September 1965 and “Can You Please Crawl Out Your Window?” in December. Indeed, for the crime of pointing out the repetition involved in the last of the trio, Phil Ochs found himself banished from Dylan’s inner circle.  

One of the movement’s traits that Dylan carried with him into his post-protest phase was the combative self-righteousness he had claimed to spurn on *Another Side*. The exultantly vindictive note of the three singles of late 1965 was already there in “When The Ship Comes In”; “Masters of War” and “Hattie Carroll” had been unyieldingly unforgiving. But in the songs of 1965 the spleen is strictly person to person. It becomes, in a way, the real matter of the music. Dylan here unashamedly glories in the weakness or misfortune of others. This up-
front indulgence in personal unpleasantness was a far cry from the demure, upbeat or sentimental attitudes favored by both folk and pop conventions. In more ways than one, it was a new kind of sound in mainstream white popular culture.

Muddy Waters, a onetime Lomax protégé, recorded his R&B classic, "Rollin' Stone," in 1951. At the time, its success was confined to the black market, but it became a cult item for young British blues fans and gave Jagger, Richards, and Jones the name for their band. The lyric is a declaration of personal independence—a macho disavowal of responsibility or permanence of affections:

Well, my mother told my father, just before I was born,  
"I got a boy child's comin,  
He's gonna be, he's gonna be a rollin' stone"

Dylan's song seizes on the metaphor from a different angle. It becomes a punishment and a prison, but also a common fate, an underlying reality. From the snare-shot opening and the surge of organ and piano, "Like a Rolling Stone" is permeated by a kind of ecstasy of schadenfreude. The ensemble rises and falls on waves of bitterness. The guitar gloats. The voice taunts: "How does it feel?" In this sustained six-minute epic of vituperation, the writing is relentlessly single-minded, yet ever-surprising. The sense of millennial confrontation that riddled Dylan's protest phase here takes on a life of its own, abstracted from any but the most personal context, and unleashed as a scornful, unpitying spirit—which was also a spirit of unmistakable freshness and energy. One of Blake's "Proverbs of Hell" commands: "Drive your cart and your plough over the bones of the dead," and there's something of the same diabolic exuberance in Dylan.

"Like a Rolling Stone" is addressed to someone raised in privilege who finds herself fallen among the dispossessed:

You've gone to the finest school all right, Miss Lonely  
But you know you only used to get juiced in it  
And nobody has ever taught you how to live on the street  
And now you find out you're gonna have to get used to it

In her heyday, the song's subject used and abused the people around her, and mistook their service for personal loyalty. Class resentment mingles here with the resentment of a rejected lover, and the eager triumphalism of an erstwhile outcast.

The seminal status of "Like a Rolling Stone" is about more than its impact on the rock 'n' roll format. It's about the song's intimate rage and almost amoral assertion of personal autonomy—a defiant response to a world that insisted on tearing away that autonomy at every turn. "Like a Rolling Stone" was Whitman's "barbaric yawp" broadcast on AM radio.

"Positively 4th Street" has always been seen as Dylan's fuck-you to the folk set. It was indeed written shortly after the Newport clash, and 4th Street in the Village was full of folk- and protest-era associations for Dylan. But apart from the title, the song is deliberately unspecific; there's no setting here, just the drama of the singer spurning false friendship. Compared to "Like a Rolling Stone," its language is plain and its verse form simple. The song lambastes insincerity and opportunism ("You just want to be on / The side that's winning") but also displays a perverse preoccupation with social hierarchy and power relations.

And now I know you're dissatisfied  
With your position and your place  
Don't you understand  
It's not my problem

Sometimes, the status consciousness seems pure teen angst:

I know the reason  
That you talk behind my back  
I used to be among the crowd  
You're in with

The least commercially successful of the three singles, "Can You Please Crawl Out Your Window?" was also, musically, the closest to the
pop-rock sounds then topping the charts. With its cymbal figure, aggressive guitar licks, and catchy chorus it sounds like the British beat of the Animals or Them. Unlike the earlier singles, this was a seduction song, with Dylan trying to win the favors of the woman in question by savaging her current lover. It was jokier and gentler, but Ochs was right to see its kinship with “Like a Rolling Stone” and “Positively 4th Street.”

The targets of the singer’s contempt in these songs are charged with the great sin in the Dylan mid-sixties universe: substituting pretense, artifice or image for the raw unpredictability of life: “You shouldn’t let other people get your kicks for you.” The rival lover in “Can You Please Crawl Out Your Window?” is one of Dylan’s straw men of academic lifelessness: “With his businesslike anger and his bloodhounds that kneel... He just needs you to talk or to hand him his chalk.” Once cast down, humbled, these people will learn how unreal and unimportant were the props they used to assert their superiority over others.

Emotions in these songs are unprettified (“You’d rather see me paralyzed”); the exultant, taunting conclusions of “Like a Rolling Stone” (“You’re invisible now, you got no secrets to conceal”) or “Positively 4th Street” (“what a drag it is / To see you”) offer no quarter to the vanquished. Marrying vindictive glee to the adrenaline kick of rock ’n’ roll, Dylan here elevated the put-down to an art form. In this respect he might be seen as a forerunner of the aggressively insulting strand of hip-hop. But, in Dylan, the snarling arrogance always carried undertones of anxiety and doubt.

In “Like a Rolling Stone” and “Positively 4th Street,” the wheel of fortune has turned. Dylan has risen to the top—and revels in it—and those who mocked or spurned him have plummeted. But there is nothing permanent here. In a whirligig society, eminence is precarious. That’s why the most important lesson is that “when you ain’t got nothin’ / you got nothin’ to lose.” In “Like a Rolling Stone,” the disinvestment in society’s trappings that Dylan counseled in “My Back Pages” or “To Ramona” or “It’s Alright Ma” becomes the actual fate of the person addressed by the singer—there are no more “alibis.” This fate is both a comeuppance, a fitting revenge, and a potential liberation.

In all of these songs there is an element of self-portraiture and self-address. The rival lover of “Can You Please Crawl Out Your Window?” could be Dylan himself:

Preoccupied with his vengeance
Cursing the dead that can’t answer him back

In “Like a Rolling Stone,” “Napoleon in rags” (ridiculed for “the language that he used”) is surely a Dylan cameo. The song only attains its full poignancy when one realizes it is sung, at least in part, to the singer himself: he’s the one “with no direction home.” Dylan’s declaration that he doesn’t owe anything to anybody, of course, a defensive ploy, an attempt to insulate himself from betrayal or disappointment, or indeed the changes in fashion and fortune that seemed to be coming thick and fast in these years. “Like a Rolling Stone” is at one and the same time a self-aggrandizing construction, an exercise in bluster, and an astonishingly candid confession.

It’s evident from these songs that Dylan was more hurt by criticism than he liked to let on. Out of his retreat from the movement, his break with former associates, and his thin-skinned reaction to critics, Dylan fashioned rich, robust works of art. But they are no more or less the “authentic” Dylan than the self-abnegating songs of social protest. The posture of rude resentment was as much a mask as the Woody Guthrie accent had been. Dylan poured into and through the mask—and by means of the mask—the same sense of commitment, confrontation, and danger that had made him stand out among the folksingers. The emerging teenage audience heard it and identified with it. Bruce Springsteen recalled the moment precisely:

The first time I heard Bob Dylan, I was in the car with my mother listening to WMCA, and on came that snare shot that sounded like somebody’d kicked open the door to your mind: “Like a Rolling Stone.” My mother—she was no stiff with rock ’n’ roll, she liked the music—sat there for a minute, then looked at me and said, “That guy can’t sing.” But I knew she was wrong. I sat there and I didn’t say nothing but I knew that
I was listening to the toughest voice that I had ever heard. It was lean and it sounded somehow simultaneously young and adult.

"Whatever you say, don’t say it twice
If you find your ideas in anyone else, disown them
The man who hasn’t signed anything, who has left no picture
Who was not there, who said nothing:
How can they catch him?
Cover your tracks.
—BERTOLT BRECHT, “HANDBOOK FOR CITY-DWELLERS"