

The Bob Dylan Solution

Walter Jon Williams

1

Pus-yellow smog drifts through the artificial canyons of Hollywood like windblown sand silting over the foundations of a Western ghost town. Anything moving below the smog curtain is invisible, certainly insignificant. Robertson takes a certain satisfaction in the thought.

"I've heard the songs Sorrel's recorded so far," says Brenner. "They're a mess, I agree with you. He's spending millions in studio time and the project isn't even near completion. A disaster."

"The computer projections aren't good." Robertson, staring down at the smog from his air-conditioned aerie, feels a reflex irritation at the back of his throat. Suddenly he's glad he gave up smoking. He clears his throat. "The whole middle-class rebellion thing is dying out. The declining economy won't support it. People are too interested in hanging on to their jobs to worry about ideology." He clears his throat again. "Sorrel's career peaked two albums ago. He's going to lose his audience in the next eighteen months. Something has to happen to make him recast his message. He needs to go affirmative."

"The psych profiles aren't encouraging, either." Hose-covered thighs sing against one another as Brenner crosses her legs. "He's losing his inspiration. Velda isn't helping. He needs something to shake him up, jump-start his creativity. Move him in a new direction."

Robertson nods. Sorrel had been his discovery, the means by which he ascended from among the smog-bound proles below to the highest penthouse atop the Lizard Records building. Talent like that comes once a decade. But what happens when the talent uses itself up?

"Velda," Brenner says, "could have an accident." Her voice is tentative.

"He'll find someone else just like her. Veldas aren't hard to find. Then we're in the same bind."

Robertson turns away from the transparent, bulletproof, evolved-aluminum window and steps toward his desk. He opens a drawer and takes out an atomizer of throat spray. He sprays his throat carefully, thrice. Brenner opens her compact and stares into the mirror.

"You know what to do," Robertson says.

Brenner, fluffing her hair, gives a single, precise nod.

2

Brenner's office is covered with diagrams of road accidents. Semi trucks, cars, motorcycles, all with little arrows, notations of velocity and direction. X-rays of broken skulls are stuck to the evolved-aluminum window with Scotch tape. Labels are affixed: Dean, Berry, Dylan, Clift, Allman. "The chief variable," Brenner says, "is Sorrel's speed. We can't control that. That's why I recommend Scenario Four. If we keep him boxed in, we can control his speed up until the moment he swings out to pass the truck."

"Good work," Robertson says.

Brenner purses her painted lips doubtfully. "There are risks. "

Robertson opens his briefcase, removes some graphs. "This sequence displays posthumous earnings by major stars. James Dean's biggest movie was released after he died. Hendrix, Elvis, Joplin, Holly, Croce

they all made more money for their estates than they ever did for themselves."

"Jan and Dean," Brenner reminds him.

"That was before we had modern PR techniques. Besides"--dropping the graphs on the desktop--"we insured the hell out of Sorrel before we let him into the studio."

Brenner looks at the graphs. "Looks like a go."

"I've already got Publicity working on the campaign for the posthumous album. Just in case things go wrong. We can get some studio hacks to fix up those uncompleted tapes. He'll sound more like himself than ever."

Brenner glances up. "The only problem," she says, "is who gives him the motorcycle?"

Robertson looks at her. "Why not Velda?"

Brenner thinks about it for a moment, then smiles. "Why not?"

3

Velda closes her lips on a Virginia Slims sticking out of the pack, draws the pack away with a clean, perfect motion of her hand. The cigarette dances in the corner of her mouth as she speaks. "I want to be executor," she says. Robertson's mouth is watering at the thought of the cigarette, old habits dying hard.

Brenner shakes her head. "Too much."

Velda lights the cigarette. Her twenty-eight-carat diamond engagement ring sparkles in the blue and amber spots of the corporate lounge. "I want to see where the money goes. You're already insured for the lost studio time. You won't lose money there."

Robertson looks from one to the other. "Co-executor," he says.

Velda blows twin curls of smoke from her chiseled ex-model nostrils. Her grey eyes gaze clearly into Robertson's. "Draw up the papers," she says. "I'll find them among Sorrel's effects if it's necessary."

4

Sorrel looks in baffled astonishment at the motorcycle standing in front of his door, a dark, ominous, retro-figured shape standing between clusters of frangipani. Here in the canyons behind L.A., the smog is only a memory and the blue sky reflects off the bike like a distant ocean horizon.

"Vincent Black Shadow," Velda says. "I thought you deserved it."

Sorrel gives an amazed grin. He steps out into the hot California sun and straddles the bike. His ropy arms reach for the handlebars.

"I gotta get some pictures," Sorrel says. "Me in a leather jacket."

Velda shakes her head. "Leather jackets are for wimps. You want denim."

Sorrel considers this. "Yeah."

"And a headband. Definitely a headband." Steering him away from the very *idea* of a helmet.

"Yeah!" There's a light in Sorrel's eyes.

Velda steps up to the bike, puts her arm around Sorrel's shoulders, kisses him. "Go crazy, man," she says.

The stunt drivers have been practicing in the canyon for five days.

5

"S-Day's tomorrow," Brenner says. The diagram of the accident--Scenario Four--lies open across her lap.

Robertson sprays his throat, coughs. "The PR team will be coming in early. We should have the word out in time for the noon broadcasts on the East Coast."

"I'll have an ambulance standing by. Along with a brain specialist and neurologist. The whole thing will look like a lucky coincidence."

"After I have breakfast with Sorrel I'll alert the drivers from my phone in the Maserati."

Brenner gives him a careful smile. She folds the plan carefully, puts it in a folder. "We make a good team."

"Yes. We do."

"I'm staying in a poolside room tonight," Brenner says. "Maybe we can have dinner sent to the room."

Robertson considers her for a moment: tousled fair hair, green eyes, painted smile. He decides against it. They know too much about one another to be involved on anything but a business level.

Once upon a time, maybe, the music business had been about joy. Then it became about money. Now it was about power, power over minds, over masses. The future.

"Perhaps some other time," he says. He rises from his chair, looks at the folder sitting next to Brenner on the couch. "Gather up all the papers and scenarios," he says. "I'll want to destroy them tomorrow."

"Good."

All the memos and diagrams have Brenner's name on them. Robertson won't destroy them; he'll keep them in a safe. One never knows when compromising documents might come in handy.

"Bye, then." He waves as he leaves, and closes the door on her smile.

6

"We're aware of your project." This three A.M. voice is somehow familiar.

"Ah," says Robertson. "What project was that?" His wife stirs uneasily on the bed beside him.

"Your project in regard to Mr. Sorrel. We wanted you to know that we approve."

"Thank you," says Robertson cautiously. "We hope the album will be a success." Where has he heard this voice before?

"During the harsh economic times to come, with their inevitable restructuring, voices such as Mr. Sorrel's can only cause discord and division. The nation requires unity, vigor, affirmation. We hope the people will hear that positive message."

The phrase *discord and division* jogs Robertson's memory; he's heard it before. He realizes the voice is

that of the President.

"Thank you, sir."

"Bless you, Mr. Robertson." The President--or his voice--hangs up. For a moment Robertson listens to the distant whispers and clicks of the world's communication network, then puts the phone gently on its cradle.

Was that really the President? he wonders. Or was it someone--maybe someone in Lizard Records--with a simulacrum of the President's voice?

Or was the President himself a simulacrum?

Robertson decides it doesn't much matter.

He sleeps very well.

7

"Thanks for breakfast. I hope I wasn't imposing."

"Not at all, man." Sorrel is smiling as he shrugs into his denim vest. He reaches into a pocket and takes out a pair of Ray-Bans, puts them on his nose. Velda, dressed in tennis whites, follows them out the door, a racket dangling in her hand.

"It was delicious," Robertson says. "I haven't had a shrimp omelette in years."

"Velda's recipe."

Robertson opens the door of his Maserati. He looks from his car to the bike and back. "You're heading for the studio, right?"

"Yeah."

"So am I." He gives Sorrel a grin. "Think you can beat me?"

Sorrel laughs. "The way I can weave in traffic? You crazy?"

"A hundred bucks?"

Delight spreads across Sorrel's face. "Whatever you say, man. But I'll beat you by half an hour. I've been going down that canyon road every morning at a hundred twenty clicks."

Robertson reaches for his cellular phone. "Let me just make a call first. Let people know I'm coming."

Velda steps up to Sorrel, kisses him goodbye. "Be careful," he says. "You know how I worry."

"I can take care of myself," says Sorrel.

8

Brenner's voice comes cool into Robertson's ear. "The PR's going out. We're the top story on all the radio networks."

"Good."

"Any news from the doctors?"

"Looks like it's not fatal."

"I'll put that on the five o'clock bulletin. That'll get us on the early evening TV news broadcasts."

"Good." Robertson clears his throat and wishes he had his atomizer. "Make sure to have that package on my desk, okay?"

"It's already there."

"Thanks. You have no idea how relieved I am at how this turned out."

9

"I hope and trust that Sorrel will be back in the studio in a matter of weeks." Robertson gives the vidcams a hesitant smile. "More than that I can't say. It's just too early."

He turns from the cameras and steps into the intensive care ward. Velda is there, sucking one of the smokeless cigarettes they sell in the hospital gift shop. Above her, familiar-looking X-ray negatives are displayed on a light board. Two doctors are pointing with their pencils and talking.

"The left cerebral cortex shows no sign of electrical activity," says one. "The right is damaged also, but to a lesser degree." His eyes gaze firmly into Velda's from behind steel-rimmed spectacles. His voice is cool, dispassionate. He might be talking about the weather in Fresno.

The other doctor sucks on his cheeks. "We can expect, at best, only a slight recovery from Mr. Sorrel's eyes. He will only be able to see dimly, if at all. When the shards from his sunglasses went in, they created massive damage. Both eyes may still have to be removed."

Velda toys with her cigarette. "Thank you, gentlemen." She nods.

"Be brave, Mrs. Sorrel." This from the second.

Velda nods. "I will."

After the doctors leave, Robertson takes Velda's arm and leads her away. Velda licks her lips. "They say the centers of personality and memory are gone," she says.

"He's a vegetable?"

"In the left hemisphere, anyway." Annoyance flickers across her perfect face. "He turned his head just before the impact, damn it. All the damage was on the left side."

"Couldn't be helped. That was one of the things that we couldn't control."

"That's why his neck snapped. He'll be a quadriplegic."

"And the right hemisphere?"

"Probably okay. Most of it, anyway."

Robertson thinks for a moment. "Miss Brenner had some work done with regard to this contingency. The right hemisphere is the creative side. It's what we want, anyway."

Velda lets out a long breath. "It'll be okay, then?"

Robertson gives her an encouraging smile. "You'd be surprised what doctors can do nowadays."

Sorrel sits expressionlessly in his wheelchair. The right side of his face is curiously slack. Electrodes creep across his cheek, disappear beneath a bandage over his empty right eye socket. The other empty socket is covered by a black patch.

Dr. Sivitsky, round and bespectacled, crouches over his controls. "He may sound strange," he says. "He can do no more than whisper. There is no control over the right side or the right vocal cord."

Robertson's mouth waters as Velda's cigarette smoke drifts to his nostrils. He nods, starts his recorder. "Go ahead, Doctor."

Sivitsky touches a control, feeds minute stimulating currents to Sorrel's speech centers. Sorrel's mouth drops open, begins working.

"Torrent of wind at nighttime," he says. His voice is hushed. "Catalog of the dead."

Robertson smiles, nods.

"Sun-dapples. Sheep. The drains are clogged."

"It's all chance, you see," Sivitsky says. "What remains of his mind is accessing partial memories at random."

"How the world spins. Arizona can be the site of the safari. Velda's smile is very special."

Velda scowls. "Gibberish."

Robertson looks at her and smiles. "Not gibberish. Lyrics."

Velda looks at him.

"Lyrics we can choose," Robertson says. "Lyrics we can control. Lyrics that can reflect any trend, mean anything we need them to mean."

A hesitant smile begins to move across Velda's face. "It's okay, then?"

The vegetable's mouth continues to move, his whisper continuing without cease. Robertson looks at Sorrel in utter satisfaction. He thinks about the words just rolling out forever, granting power to whoever could shape them. He wonders if words rolled out of the President in the same way.

"It's better than we could have hoped," he says.

He reaches for his cellular phone to tell Brenner to get the PR rolling. Sorrel, he says, is writing again.

How the World Spins ships platinum.

With a bullet.